

Jane Gillespie

Spoonsilver

Þ

PETER DAVIES : LONDON

First published 1922

Printed in Great Britain by
Willmer Brothers Limited
Birkenhead

I

Julia Briggs, only daughter of John (Consolidated Trusts, Imber Breweries, &c. &c.) Briggs, took half an hour on a May afternoon to plan her future.

She sat on the steps of the school cricket pavilion, whence everyone else had gone, to do something or other that Julia should have been doing too. One's future, though, was obviously more important.

She had noticed how often nature harmonized with her own mood or condition of the moment. This was an afternoon of calm promise; young beech leaves hung brilliant in a silky mist; the scent of trodden grass was cool and lush; anything could happen.

Julia, who knew a good deal about her own character, knew that she could be impetuous when her feelings were aroused, but knew too that she had determination. It was up to her to decide what *would* happen. Again, the possibilities were infinite.

She knew all about her appearance too. She wasn't strictly pretty—well, not unstrictly, either. Her eyes were set rather too close together and were not large; but they were a striking colour, turquoise-grey, and full of light. They showed a quality that Julia knew was more valuable than prettiness: vitality, vivacity; and everyone agreed that she was intelligent. The mistresses here admitted it when they sighed: ' . . . If only you'd *work*, Julia . . . '

They implied that if only she'd work she could achieve anything. It escaped them that she had already achieved what was worth having—the Senior Music prize, popularity, Portia in the Dramatic Society, house prefectship—without working at all.

Julia supposed they were more used to dealing with the kind of girl—and there were several, apparently, even in

a school like this—who would later have to work for a living. She didn't see why anyone really needed to. Living was more important than working, and anyway, for a woman, there was always marriage.

Julia would marry, of course. Women who didn't ended up devoted to either hypochondria or good works. The question was, what kind of a marriage would best suit her?

She reflected: I've got too much *in* me to be simply a wife . . .

She might, if she wanted to, be a concert pianist. Or a poetess. Sometimes in chapel it occurred to her that she had mystical gifts as well, and that such a potentially rich life as hers might best be given to God.

None of these schemes, anyhow, required her to pass exams. The immediate point of her present reflections was that next year was 'exam year' and likely, in view of everything, to be a waste of time. She might as well leave school at the end of this term.

And do what? Music. She was fifteen and a half already. Two years' music, say, and perhaps abroad; it was time she widened her experience of the world. She loved people. She could never meet enough of them . . . Anyway: Two years' music, and then a London season; and that brought her back to the prospect of marriage.

She thought it would be a fine ideal to marry some genius, to whom she could minister, whom her vitality might inspire. She could be tremendously devoted when she really admired someone. The trouble was, there were not many people she did really admire, when she came to know them. Her acquaintance was varied. Her father's friends were business men and politicians, her mother's interests were artistic, she had an elder brother in the Guards and another at Oxford; she had been brought up, in town, among the children of Belgravia, and in the country, among the Pony Club county crowd. She got on with everybody. But when it came to devoting her life to someone, she had to admit she had never found

anyone she fancied. Perhaps she was destined to inspire devotion, rather than give it?

She knew that much was expected of her. Her mother had said more than once: 'I don't know who *Julia's* going to marry . . . '

Pondering painters, politicians, oil magnates, bishops, royalty, Julia came to the conclusion that no one would be quite worthy of those implied expectations. To choose one, would be to exclude all others; she did not accept limitations.

She brooded, frowning at a grass stain on her white sock. It came to her: The marriage she would make would be of the kind that made everybody remark: 'She's thrown herself away.'

The phrase pleased her. And it seemed that somehow she could have everything at once: Love, marriage, but still her originality and a vital freedom.

* * *

When she had made this decision Julia forgot about it again until it should become relevant. Yet when it did, she acted in accordance with it before she had remembered about it.

She remembered two hours after she had promised to marry Julian. Back in her bedroom at three on a June morning she stared at herself in the glass, alone with herself, wondering.

Excitement had given her a sparkle that lingered. In the glass she saw beauty. Her skin was drained and translucent, her eyes glowed. Her hair, topknotted in the fashion of that year, was falling loose, drawing dark pencil strokes on a white shoulder. A red rose was crumpled at the bosom of her black cotton dress; they had been to a studio party. Her image was outlined in dawn-blue as she gazed.

Julian. Well; Julian . . . ?

She thought for the first time: What will they all *say*? Then, unpinning her rose and stroking it against her

throat, she mused: I foresaw this, in a way. I remember thinking, ages ago, when I was young, about the kind of person I'd marry . . . It shows how right my instincts have always been. And how right I am to follow them.

She was twenty and a half now. Following her instincts, she had kept to the plan outlined when she was fifteen. She had worked hard at her music, except for a winter in New Zealand, where she had accompanied her mother when the doctors had recommended it for Mrs Briggs's health. She had glittered through her London season, fallen in love three times, broken at least one heart (as its owner gravely assured her), made hundreds of friends, and would have been in the County tennis team two summers ago if she hadn't been invited for a holiday on the Hartletons' yacht.

Her life, like herself, had been full of variety. Without trying to, she was always surprising people. Indeed she never strove for effect. Whatever she did, she did with utter sincerity and no self-consciousness. Self-awareness, in contemplating action before or afterwards, was a quite different thing.

Sometimes she raced about in slacks, with streaming hair, a true Bohemian. Then half an hour after that she could reappear dressed for a dinner party in satin and pearls, and talk there to Cabinet ministers as well as any society hostess. People said: 'Whatever next?'

Her mother alone said this in a tone of complaint. But then her mother was behind the times. She probably wanted a daughter who would do the flowers and carry the smelling salts—No; that wasn't quite fair. Mummy actually wasn't at all well. She couldn't be expected to live up to such a high-powered daughter. It was the pain of her varied illnesses that made her fretful.

Julia was never fretful, or angry. 'But Mummy *darling*,' she said, dropping a kiss on her mother's cheek, 'I let you drag me all the way to New Zealand. What *else* can I do?' She was demonstrative with people she loved, and with dogs and cats. She had a robin who came to the

breakfast room window to eat out of her hand. She overflowed with love, in every direction; she had so much of it.

'Well—nothing in particular . . .' began Mrs Briggs plaintively.

'Well, if you're sure—*sure* you don't need me just now—I can go to the dress rehearsal at Covent Garden, Geoffrey will get me in.'

'And what time can we expect you back?'

'Oh, goodness knows. I might go home with Sarah. Anyhow I'll come and say goodnight to you if you're still awake, I promise. Now you rest, darling, and look after yourself . . . '

For a while, Julia moved out into a flat with Penelope and Susan, but life was pretty impossible when it was cluttered up with shopping and cooking and laundry, so she moved back home. She did feel, besides, that Mummy might seriously miss her.

People did. Nothing made Julia doubt her welcome anywhere. She said of herself: 'I may have no charm, but I've loads of cheek.' She despised 'charm' anyway and thought a direct approach the best. She had had, last winter, a series of lessons from Moshe Balkan when he was in London, simply by sailing up to him at a reception and asking him.

Equally 'typical Julia' was an occasion whereon he was rehearsing with the Chamber Orchestra a Mozart that she had been studying with him. In the stalls, Julia sat listening, with another pupil of his, a surly young man called Michael Goldrei. Balkan was directing the orchestra from the keyboard and Julia and Goldrei both noticed that, when he paused to talk, Balkan cradled his right elbow in his left hand. Goldrei muttered: 'That ligament's giving him gyp; you see?'

Julia saw. It was beyond her not to do something about it when poor Balkan was suffering and when obviously he ought to be resting that arm. As soon as he had finished his remarks on the final movement she jumped up and

called: 'Maestro, I'm sure your arm's hurting you. Won't you let me fill in for you for a little while?'

Everyone gaped. Fiddles fell from under chins like ripe pears from boughs. Michael Goldrei sprawled back in his seat to dissociate himself from this madwoman. Balkan said in his Israeli-American accent: 'Sure, you do that, Julia. Come on up here.'

Up flew Julia to the platform. She prayed for a clear head; courage she had already demonstrated. Before she was firmly on the piano stool Balkan was saying:

'Now ya-ta-ta, ta, ta, ta . . . a *dwelling* staccato . . . You see?' A flick of his hand and they were off. Thank God, she remembered it. She was inspired. Her fingers were swift and clean. When Balkan pulled them up it was because the strings were 'splashing too much there on the *grazioso*'. Only twice did she muff an entry, and both times she neatly caught up. Afterwards the leader bowed to her and everyone beamed.

Afterwards Goldrei said: 'You deserved to have your bloody head bitten off.'

Julia beamed at Goldrei, who was only envious. He was a better pianist than she, she would willingly grant. What he lacked was human sensitivity; he simply hadn't Julia's gift for relationships. They knew each other intermittently, after the winter of Balkan, but were never close friends. There wasn't much she could do for Michael; he was incorrigibly uncouth.

Whereas, for Julian, there was everything she could do. . . . He was, she had to admit, a little uncouth too in his way, but that was mostly shyness; and youth, of course; he seemed at times younger than she. Julian and Julia. . . . They would make a pair, they would complement each other. He was lazy, where she was energetic. He was diffident, where she was forthright. He was large, while she was small. He was fair, and she was dark. He was poor, and she was, even if Daddy made a fuss and didn't give her much of an allowance, still quite well provided

with her own money, or would be when she was twenty-one, which event no one would be able to delay.

And they were both amiable, intelligent, musical. They had a lot in common. In the three weeks they had known each other they had discovered this.

'Julian who?' asked her father at breakfast next day.

'James. He's a wind player—oboe and bassoon. Not both at once of course—'

'Where's he from?'

'He lives in Islington and he's a peripatetic teacher for the LCC just now, but if only he got a chance to—'

'Who are his people, I mean?'

'Well, people, anyway, I suppose; like anybody else's.'

'I might have expected something like this. He'll have to come and see me, no doubt.'

'Of course he will. As soon as you like.'

'Well, I don't know offhand when I can fit it in. Arrange it with Mason. And when you go up to your mother, remind her I shall be in Brussels next week, if she wants to have the Wetherbys.' He was off, dry and spry, and on cue his car slid into sight beyond the net curtain of the breakfast-room window. The chauffeur and Julia's robin eyed each other, waiting.

Julia telephoned Julian at his Tuesday-morning school. 'I've prepared the ground with Daddy and he wants to meet you. You'd better come to dinner today. I don't believe anybody else is coming.'

'I can't do that; I'm teaching till half past twelve.'

'Midnight?'

'Oh. You mean you have your dinner in the evening?'

'Well, who doesn't? Come at about seven. Don't wear anything special. I shan't see you till then, darling, because I've got to go with Mummy to the Garden Party this afternoon, I've just remembered.'

'Whose garden?'

'Oh, she does this work for paraplegics, you know, when she's fit, but never mind that. . . . See you at seven, here?'

'Where? Do I know your address?'

'Darling, you can be *dim* . . . '

It was not unusual for Julia to dine *en famille* in slacks and a check shirt; it was rather more unusual for a guest to arrive thus attired. Mrs Briggs, exhausted by the garden party, dined upstairs. Mr Briggs thought his own thoughts while Julian and Julia talked music. It turned out later that Julian had supposed his host to be deaf. At the end of the meal Mr Briggs said civilly: 'Well, good evening to you,' and made for the door.

'Daddy, wait. Julian wants to talk to you.'

'I beg your pardon. You must excuse my informality. We don't nowadays keep up the ceremony of the ladies leaving us, except when we have a large party . . . Hanson,' added Mr Briggs in a palpably resigned tone, 'the port, please.' He came back to his chair. He and Julian gazed blankly at each other.

Julia saw that she had better stay.

Later she said: 'I think that went all right in the end, don't you?'

'He doesn't seem too keen on me,' said Julian unresentfully.

'Well, he isn't marrying you. Now let's make plans. Do you want a church wedding?'

'That's as you like. But, it's a bit early for plans, isn't it? I'll have to save up. I've only got—'

'Oh, never mind about money.'

Julian didn't, much. He was vague about it. He was vague about his surroundings too; about a week later, at some reference of Julia's, he said: 'D'you mean you live in the whole of that gloomy great house? I thought it was just a flat you had.'

It was Mrs Briggs who, as Julia persisted, finally voiced: 'But darling, he's a nice enough boy, but not *quite* . . . '

'Mummy dear, snobbery went out with the war.'

'I know, I'm not being old-fashioned. . . . But I do think . . . After all, Northampton . . . of all places . . . And no prospects . . . No, Julia, you've just rushed into this and it isn't at all wise. You're just throwing yourself away.'

So she was, and so in the end she did. It was her own secret that the phrase did not disparage Julian. He, with his sleepy smile and steady hands, contained all her happiness. With him she was at peace. When she had stimulated him and encouraged him and made something of him, they would all see.

The engagement merited a picture in the *Daily Express*. 'Tycoon's Daughter To Wed Music Teacher.' The wedding was photographed for all the dailies. They had a guard of honour of crossed violin bows. Mrs Briggs had protested: 'Oh darling, I hardly think St George's—for Julian's family. Won't they be a bit . . . overwhelmed?'

Mr Briggs had said: 'I wash my hands of the whole business.'

Julia's eldest brother said tactlessly: 'Well, you'll be able to keep the chap, won't you, after all.'

Mrs James said: 'Well, I don't know. I never expected Julian to rise so high in the world.'

Julia was radiantly happy and laughed at it all. Her father, washed hands or no, had given her a generous allowance. She bought a charming old brick house in a Thames-side village, with sunken rose garden, and there, as Mrs Julian James, she began her renewed life.

* * *

Julia's family and friends were not sure what to 'make of' Julian. Some of them guessed that any 'making' would be in Julia's hands; they wished her luck; he seemed pleasant enough, but they doubted that there was much to him. The general opinion was that Julia, being Julia, may have felt she needed someone placid as a consort.

It was noticed that within a year or so, Julia was turning up in town more often alone. Julian was busy; he was composing a wind octet. Julian was tired. Julian didn't much care for parties. Julian had been working so hard in the garden.

Julian, her intimates suspected, was boring her stiff.

She appeared at concerts and parties once or twice with pre-marriage flames. Once or twice she remarked that she didn't love the human race any less because she happened to have married the nicest piece of it.

She entertained fairly often at Bolvers, her Berkshire house. Julian was a helpful and smiling host, silently pouring drinks. His hair was longer; sometimes he wore a velvet jacket or a bow tie.

Julia's second brother, the Oxford graduate, asked his father: 'Has that chap not got a job of any kind? Does he live on Julia?'

'I believe he takes pupils in trumpet-blowing or whatever it is. And she's got him reviewing records for some magazine. And says he's composing music. Well, as long as she's happy. . . .'

'You always spoilt her, you know.'

'I did?'

Mrs Briggs died during the second year of the marriage. People murmured: ' . . . You know, she never really got over Julia's wedding . . . '

Well, they added, as long as Julia's happy. . . .

General opinion was beginning to admit that she must be, when an unexpected turn was taken by events. After two and a half years of bliss and music, there was to be a divorce. And it was not Julia who had got bored and broken out, but Julian who evidently wanted to marry someone else.

Julia was quite frank about it. 'You know I always believe in telling the simple truth,' she told everyone. 'I haven't got any silly pride and I don't spare my own feelings. And I'm very fond of Julian, fond enough to put his interests before my own. He was very sweet about it and said he'd hate to hurt me, but of course it would hurt me far more to feel I was standing in his way. In a way I've done all I can for him, and that's something I shall always be grateful for.'

So she divorced Julian, and Julian went off to the midlands and reputedly married some 'girl who had been

a childhood friend, and reputedly got a job playing the bassoon in a provincial orchestra, and was known no more in Julia's circle.

* * ; *

What Julia with all her frankness did not mention was that, when Julian asked her for a divorce, it was because his Olwen's baby was already on the way. He had for some time been spending Friday nights in Northampton after teaching an evening class; with old friends, he had said; with Olwen and, he had allowed Julia to suppose, Olwen's parents. It had not been convenient for his own parents to put him up.

Julia met Olwen once. She said she owed it to herself and to Julian. She did not explicitly say that she had Julian's interests enough at heart to feel responsible for what she might be passing him on to. Nor did she, with all her self-awareness, admit that she wanted to see what Julian had preferred to herself. All she was conscious of was the pain of the whole situation, on which she must press as if on an aching tooth, to overcome it. And she did. She drove herself to *live* the situation and not merely to suffer it. So she rose above it.

Olwen was gentle and vague—she resembled Julian, in many ways. Swollen with her baby she faced Julia unhappily in the untidy sitting-room of her flat. She was a couple of years older than Julian; she had a mother in Southport; she had been an infant school-teacher until a few weeks ago and murmured that she'd like to go back to it when she could. 'I mean, after the baby's... you know...'

'Julian will have to get a job,' said Julia briskly.

To her own surprise, this notion rather pleased her. It would do him good to have to take responsibility. Or was she being a little vindictive? That wouldn't be like her, at all.

Whether because she was sorry for Olwen, or whether because she found her so harmless, or whether because

she still wished Julian well, or whether because it was a secret relief in some ways to be rid of him, Julia continued to take a friendly interest in the James household. When the baby, Felicity, was born, she sent a cheque. She sent cards every Christmas. She received cards in return. She was told on one of these of the birth of Felix; she sent another cheque, and a request to be told when his birthday was. When Fenella was born, Julia had a card of announcement, and thought that very nice of the Jameses. She sent a third cheque; and thereafter, a pound note on each of the birthdays and a card to the whole family at Christmas. Through all these years she did not meet Julian or Olwen again, but counted them among her friends and was sure they counted her among theirs.

* * *

It was some little time after Julian's defection that Julia took another half hour to plan her future. It was, as it happened, almost exactly ten years after her session on the steps of the cricket pavilion at school when she lay in bed one morning at Bolvers and looked out at the garden swathed in river mist. Nature depicted her situation; the trees, shrouded, were not remote; her future was hidden for the moment but tangible.

The delay had not been caused by any grief for Julian. It was, even now, hardly possible to imagine him here, beside her, in this bed. Julia couldn't help admiring her own resilience. Anyone else, she felt, would have moped at the early destruction of such a promising marriage, and the consequent solitude.

But I'm never lonely, she reflected. I've kept up with all my old friends and I'm still making new ones. And anyway, I can't pretend that it wasn't my idea, as much as Julian's, that we should separate. He didn't really take me by surprise. And it was all for the best.

This morning, with no one staying here and no engagements for today, she could appreciate solitude. If anything

she had been *too* gay lately. One could hardly open an illustrated paper without seeing a group that included 'Mrs Julia James' at a dance, at a point-to-point, at an opening night. Rather fetching she looked, too, with the fashionable *gamine* haircut . . . It was all great fun, but was that what life was for? She had too much *in* her to be merely a social butterfly. She felt she had been scattering her energies rather than employing them.

She had profited by her marriage to Julian to learn more about herself. What she now decided was that she would like to be closer to the heart of things . . . to real life. Life with Julian had been too secluded. She had hoped to foster his creativeness; and creativeness was a splendid thing, but detached from the immediate realities and power of the community.

And another thing she now realized: It was a mistake to marry someone not of your own kind. Heaven knew Julia was not snobbish, even if snobbishness still existed; but it was a bore going about with someone who didn't know what to talk about or what fork to use. Julian had been willing to learn, but dense. She'd had to *keep* reminding him; 'Oh, I forgot,' he would say in his amiable unapology. *

In fact poor Julian hadn't had much ambition at all. It was doubtful that she would ever have made anything of him. He was lazy and had no real initiative; he wouldn't even have proposed to her if she hadn't jollied him into it.

So, however, the question rather remained as it had when she was fifteen: What kind of a marriage would really suit her? Because it must still be marriage. She had no thought of making any kind of a career. Nowadays she played her piano instead of practising on it. She didn't see herself as given over to charitable works and she had renounced, when she grew up, any idea of religious life. She still had her faith, of course; she thought people without religion lacked stability and spiritual resource; but her special gift was for *people*. Only in the world's

real life could she use her brain and sympathy and adaptability to the full.

She saw no special obligation to be 'useful'. Usefulness was the refuge of people who lacked the gifts or the chance to be anything else. But she rather despised the 'idle rich'—who, whatever the popular press said, still survived; she moved largely among them. Julia was not made for frivolity, in spite of her gay temperament. She had, when she considered it, ideals of service. And true companionship. She wanted a marriage that could be a partnership. That was what she had never achieved with poor Julian. From that experience she had learnt that adoration on either side was not necessary to a valuable relationship. Plenty of people adored *her*, of course, but she could for that very reason not imagine marrying them. Nor did she still, in that adolescent fashion, seek a hero. She wanted, now, someone she could respect.

* * *

Julia outlined most of these ideas to Andrew Flend, beside whom she was placed at a dinner party a few months later. Andrew could not feel that he might be the object of them, since although he was one of her dearest friends he was confirmed by everybody as a bachelor. He was immensely tall and thin, in his mid-forties, with bulging brown eyes that made him seem to receive every remark addressed to him with amazed non-comprehension. He had gone from Cambridge into the Colonial Service but his main interest was anthropology, so that his knowledge of African affairs had a scholarly slant. Recently he had served on a semi-official commission set up by the government to sort out some of those; originally the commission's title had been 'Co-ordinating Research on African Politics', but someone had pointed out that nowadays nearly everything came to be known by its initials so the title had been altered to 'General Research on African Politics'. The work, which had sent Andrew

for some time to Mwalalaland, had just been completed, and Andrew hoped to be appointed to the chair of anthropology at a northern university.

He listened, goggling, to what Julia said and did not comment. He very rarely smiled. He ate two more mouthfuls of turbot. He said: 'What about Peter Culfax?'

Andrew's suggestions when he offered them were usually to the point, but this one struck Julia as point blank. 'What about him?'

'I thought perhaps he'd do.'

She looked down the table, smiling. Peter Culfax, bending an attentive ear to his further neighbour, presented his profile to Julia. It was a good profile. He had more hair than Andrew but it was silvering at the temples. 'How old is he?' asked Julia, forthright as ever.

'Should think, forty?'

'But I don't see myself as a political wife. Well, if he is still in politics? What's he doing nowadays? I've met him a few times, of course. But not lately. I thought he was governing somewhere?'

'Not any more. Mwalalaland's getting its independence.'

'Oh, yes; so I heard. It's going to be called . . . ?'

'Mwalele.' Andrew sat up and began to talk almost with animation. 'It's a small country but fairly rich in resources. I went there first, you know, assistant ADO, more than twenty years ago. It was then, and is now, entirely in the hands of its ruling family, who are a remarkable crowd. Politically astute to a degree. They constitute the government and the opposition; so you see, at every family row they just swop over. Meanwhile, they've got the place so well organized that it could adapt itself to any form of constitution at the drop of a hat. If it's the fashion to be independent they'll be as independent as anybody. Next year they might well be communist. But you can bet that in any event the Sibhodo family will pop up on top again. A very fly set.'

'What has that to do with Peter Culfax?'

'Oh well, he was obliging enough to go out there as

Governor when old Sir Martin died, though everybody knew it would be for only a couple of years. Just for the look of the thing, till independence came through. It meant giving up his seat in parliament, but they say he'll get a knighthood. And from what he tells me, now our work on GRAP's over, he wants to get back in again. There's a by-election pending, Swenbury and Arth Valley . . .'

'Where on earth's that?'

Julia was wearing blue velvet and a pearl choker tonight and her hair was sleekly bouffant. After dinner she approached her hostess: 'What happened to Peter Culfax's wife? I've forgotten.' It would be no use asking Andrew for domestic details.

'Cancer, I think, poor thing. It must be . . . five years ago?'

'And hadn't he some children?'

'Yes, two. Little girls.'

'Poor little creatures.' Julia's sympathy was ready. Still . . . politics didn't much interest her.

Peter Culfax did, when she sailed up to him after the gentlemen had joined them. He said among other things that politics and *party* politics were quite separate games. This had not struck Julia before. Her suggestion that party politics was a waste of intelligence he countered with the suggestion that in party politics intelligence would be wasted.

' . . . This is the television age. The age of the common man. It's a handicap to be clever, and a mistake to appear so.'

'Is that a clever remark, or just cynical?'

'I'd hoped it was both. Are they mutually exclusive?'

'I hear you're going into parliament again.'

'I hope so. The constituency is marginal.'

'So why do you risk it?'

'Because, largely, it's a rural area and agriculture is my chief concern.'

'That, as well as Africa?'

'Before and after Africa,' he said, seriously. She did not think he was as cynical as he liked to appear. He managed to explain the economic plight of the British farmer without being pompous. Once or twice as he talked his eyes travelled over her hair or shoulders.

' . . . And your election campaign; will that be politics, or party?'

'Oh, party, frightfully. Enormous fun.'

'Fun? Kissing babies and uttering lavish promises? I must say I rather loathe that kind of spectacle.'

'You take it too solemnly. It's the electorate we are playing for on these occasions—'

'And aren't they to be taken solemnly?'

'Well, in the nature of things, half of them are of below average intelligence.'

Julia worked that out. She began to respect him.

Presently he admitted, rather charmingly, that he had forgotten her name. (But after all, he had been in Mwa-what's-it for the last two years.) Then he asked if he might take her out to dinner one night next week.

At that dinner Julia said: 'Perhaps you'd come down to Bolvers the weekend after next. I'm having Andrew Flend, and Richenda Lewis . . . '

His brow puckered a little but he said: 'That would be delightful.'

'So why frown?' asked Julia forthrightly.

'Did I . . . ? It may be ungallant of me, but I have a feeling people are trying to bring me and Richenda together.'

'I hadn't intended that. But I knew you were friends,' said Julia, who had been making inquiries.

'Yes, we are, I hope. But there seems to be a conspiracy abroad to get me to marry again.'

'It might not be a bad idea. Would you like to bring your little girls with you, to Bolvers?'

'Thank you, but they'll be at school.'

'Are they happy?'

'At Cheltenham?'

'And at home.'

'I think so. We've been very fortunate in Hoppy—that's their governess, Miss Hopkins. She's been with them since Pam was five, and has really been a second mother.'

'Oh. Good.'

* * *

Actually Julia, while she was very fond of Pam and Sally, was never a mother to them. She did not feel they expected her to be. They were very fond of Julia too, but they had Hoppy.

Hoppy was possessive of them, but tactful about it. She and Julia got on very well, because Julia was tactful too. In any case, Pam and Sally were not the daughters she might have imagined for herself. They were pretty, well-behaved girls but not powerfully affectionate, even towards Peter whom they adored. They did fairly well at school but were not brilliant, and they did not seem to have the interests that Julia had had at their age; they did not write poetry, they were not keen on music, they did not play imaginative games; they rode their ponies and watched television. They were fifteen and thirteen when their father remarried, difficult ages, Julia would have thought, but they accepted their stepmother easily. She had been prepared for jealousy, and tricky undercurrents; it was hard for her not to admit to herself sometimes that her stepdaughters were a rather dull pair.

The use of her special gifts on them was not in the event called for. She was just a little disappointed.

* * *

Mr Briggs said: 'It's about time you settled down. You've been gadding about altogether too much lately. Now you'll have to behave yourself.'

'Oh, Daddy, I always have.'

'They say he's a coming man, Culfax.'

Her elder brother who was present said: 'He'll come on all the faster with Julia behind him.'

'With him,' corrected Julia gently.

'Wrong party, of course, but that's going to matter less and less. The country's going headlong into an economic box-up and whoever's in power will have to concentrate on getting out of that. There won't be much scope for policy.'

'Peter doesn't think so.'

'He will, when he gets in the thick of it.' Jonathan Briggs was an M.P. himself at twenty-nine and knew it all.

After the by-election Peter said: 'I owe all that to you, you know. I'm sure it made an excellent impression that I produced a new wife just at the start of the campaign.'

'Is that why you did it?'

'Don't be silly.'

'I hadn't expected to enjoy it all, but I did. I seemed to meet kinds of people I'd never met before. I've mixed with the upper classes and the lower classes, but never those cretins in the middle.'

'I did warn you. They're the backbone of the country and don't you forget it.'

'I found them quite fascinating.' He glanced at her quizzically. 'Do I sound like Maudie Littlehampton? But I do mean it. I find all sorts of things fascinating. I've got that kind of a mind. And I always seem to get on well with people, whatever kind they are. It's just as well.'

'It's just as well for me too,' said Peter affectionately.

Outside, the sunless February afternoon was forbidding. Inside, the tall house breathed centrally-heated efficiency. Efficiently, a Spanish maid was loading a tea-trolley from the service-lift on the first floor. When she had done so she chimed a silver bell in the well of the staircase.

In his study at the back of the ground floor Sir Peter Culfax raised his head and said to his secretary: 'I shan't require tea. Would you be good enough to tell Lady Culfax?'

In the hall the secretary replied: 'If you must treat me like a bloody parlourmaid, need you talk like one?'

She climbed on the thick carpet past the shell-framed Victorian silhouettes, so quaint and original. As a matter of fact, they were rather striking here. Lady Culfax had good taste.

Lady Culfax was in the drawing-room with an elderly man who sat on the couch, spiky as an inside-out deck-chair.

'Sir Peter doesn't want any tea, Lady Culfax.'

'Oh, but—thank you, Margaret. Would you tell him Professor Flend's here? I'm sure he'll want to see him.'

The secretary found herself smiling. Lady C. was always a breath of fresh air after her husband. She was wearing a rather gorgeous wool frock, tangerine, with patent slippers.

Sir Peter said: 'Flend?' He thought for a few moments. At least, his brow puckered, not unhandsomely. It was his looks that had trapped Margaret into supposing she'd like this job. As a matter of fact, it wasn't his fault the work was so dull. But he didn't exactly enliven it. 'I wonder if you'd be so kind,' he began . . .

Back trotted the secretary up to the drawing-room. 'Sir

Peter still says he's too busy for tea, but wonders if Professor Flend could possibly look in on him before he goes, for a few minutes?'

Professor Flend goggled his large brown eyes as if Sir Peter kept a torture chamber down there. Lady C. shot him a quick puzzled look. She said: 'Poor Margaret, running up and down like this. Anyway you're staying for dinner, aren't you, Andrew?'

'No,' said the gaunt visitor without apology. 'I've got to go to that philology affair.'

'Well then . . . I can't think what Peter wants that's so private, but perhaps you'd spare him a minute on your way out?'

'Oh, rather.'

Down trotted the secretary.

'We see so little of you,' said Julia, sitting briskly up to the tea-trolley. 'I'm sure it's terribly bad for you to bury yourself away from the world like that. You're thinner than ever. Eat something, do.'

Roused, Flend stretched an arm towards a plate of neat little sandwiches and began to put them into his mouth, one after another. 'How is Peter?' he asked.

'Oh, well . . . He had 'flu, you know. It took it out of him. I begin to ask myself what exactly it took. . . .' She looked at Flend with a mischievous brief smile, and passed him his cup. 'Actually, Andrew, I'm particularly glad you came. There aren't many people I can talk to really frankly.'

Flend's eyes bulged in what could have been disbelief. He took another sandwich.

' . . . There aren't many people, I mean, who are totally uninvolved. You know what life is . . . I've got a pretty good idea that Peter will want to ask your advice about his career.'

Flend's eyes widened alarmingly for a moment. He swallowed.

'You did hear about this Central African Relations office?' And as Flend shook his head she went on with

a flick of her hand: 'No, one forgets how out of things you are . . . Anyway, it's an invention of the P.M.'s and Peter's definitely in line for it. But for some inscrutable reason he doesn't seem keen.'

'And you want him to have it?'

'My *dear* Andrew, when did I ever try to influence Peter!'

Flend shook his head again, blank.

'The *last* thing I am is a pushing political wife. Everybody would admit that. Still, I can't help feeling—and people tell me things, you know; I usually have a fair idea which way the various winds are blowing—I have a *sort* of feeling that this may be Peter's last chance of Cabinet rank.'

'Oh,' said Flend after appearing to reflect. 'At *his* age?'

'Yes, I know, he's only fifty-three, but what has he done so far? I'm not belittling his achievement, of course; all I mean is that he hasn't stuck to one line. I think if he had, he'd have gone farther. Africa and agriculture, and then he's wasted a lot of energy on his sidelines—the Culfax Camps, you know, and so on . . . '

'If he wanted to get to the top,' suggested Flend after a pause, 'he should have concentrated on that, whatever line led to it.'

'Andrew, that remark isn't worthy of you.'

Flend forbore to say that it might nevertheless be worthy of Peter. He gazed at the empty sandwich plate and cupped one hand round the back of his head.

' . . . All that worries me,' Julia said, 'is a curious sense of . . . reluctance in him. Nobody knows better than I do how able Peter is, and how high his ideals are. I think,' she added with more energy, 'it could simply be that 'flu. He had it badly. The doctor was afraid of pneumonia. He's bound to take a while to get over it. I always think this time of year is dispiriting anyhow, don't you? Not that it affects me. I've got enough natural vitality to carry me through. It's amazing,' she said suddenly, staring

at Flend, 'that now for the first time I feel so much younger than Peter!'

If her stare in any way challenged him, Flend did not respond. He stared back hazily. 'How old are you?' he asked, as if it had taken him some time to find the appropriate question.

'Andrew, how ungallant of you. Actually I'm nearly forty, so I'm the one who ought to be feeling old; not that Peter is. That isn't what I meant. Only that you've known him for so long, and when you worked with him, on GRAP, it was all about African politics so you do know how good he is at that sort of thing. . . . So if he *should* ask your advice . . . I'm just giving you a hint.'

Flend's silence wondered: A hint of what? He recrossed his legs. From his face during this conversation, an observer might have supposed him to be hideously baffled and deeply alarmed; but his body was quite in repose, after its angular fashion. Some mental fog, and the habit of not sharing his ideas except in print, made him carry on most conversations at a remove. Julia knew he was not such a fool as he looked. But there was a rallying tone to her voice as she said: 'You're not getting younger yourself, my dear. You're balder than when I last saw you, aren't you.'

'I'll be sixty in August,' said Flend without expression.

'I think when Peter's sixty, he'll begin to find himself again. He should do well as an elder statesman. These are only the middle years, after all. And that's another thing, of course. This African thing could well lead to a peerage, if there are still such things as peers by the time he's finished with it. The whole situation's such a melting-pot, isn't it? You have to be on your toes to deal with it. Or is that a mixed metaphor. More tea? You haven't drunk that cup yet.'

Flend gazed at his cup, mildly surprised to see it. As he made no move, Julia did not pursue that question, except obliquely by saying: 'The genuine absent-minded professor. I wish you'd move back to town. I'd like to

see more of you, and you know Imogen adores you. And Peter likes you too. And being out in that dim place makes you dimmer than ever. Oh; that reminds me. Julian—or Olwen, she does all the work—wrote on their Christmas card that Felix is in London at college. What kind of college can it possibly be? One of the schools? He's only... Well, I've lost count. I know when his birthday is but I've no idea how many he's had. Fifteen? I wrote a note back, specially, telling Olwen to give him my address and tell him to come and see me. But he hasn't. So like that family.'

'What family?' asked Flend, his eyes goggling as if he swam like a fish to catch up with her.

'Oh, *Andrew*. You remember. My girlhood romance. Julian James. Yes, you do remember. You came to Bolvers once for a weekend with Cleo. It was winter, and we were all skating on the pond in the village. You went sprawling and sprained your wrist. That was when Julian was there; I remember him getting ice cubes out of the fridge to put on it, when the whole house was dangling with icicles... It's funny, the little things one does remember.'

'Yes. So who's Felix?'

'Julian's son,' said Julia, patiently. 'In a way I always think of those children as related to me, you know. It's hard not to think of Felix as my little nephew. Not that I've seen him. Or, I must say, heard from him; though I've sent birthday presents to all those three all their lives, I've yet to have a letter of thanks. Julian was always vague and I dare say his children take after him. It isn't as if I hadn't quite enough people depending on me already; Felix will be no loss. More tea?'

'I'd forgotten you were married before,' Flend said.

'Well, I don't go round chattering about it. It wasn't a great success. I was very young, and rather swept off my feet. Even so, I'd hardly have expected you to forget. But then, you're incredibly vague too. Not in the same

way as Julian though. You're not much interested in people, are you, Andrew?'

'No; not much,' he said after considering it.

'That's really astonishing to me, because people are my *life*. If it weren't for other people, life would have no meaning at all for me.'

Flend's melancholy gaze seemed to envisage such a fate.

'... Perhaps that's a rather feminine thing. Men don't seem to take other people so seriously, have you noticed? Not so sympathetically. Look at you, for instance. And if Peter's been anywhere without me, he never has a ghost of an idea what anyone was wearing... I'm more grateful than I can say, that whatever else life has given me, it has given me so many people I could help and comfort.'

'Well,' said Flend as she paused, 'you've always had money, haven't you.'

'My dear Andrew, what has that to do with it? You know me better than that. Even if I'd been poor, I'd have made something of my life. I've got plenty of energy and I'm not without gifts.' She looked with affection at the Bechstein against the back wall of the room.

'Oh, rather,' said Flend.

The door began to open, hesitated, opened wider, and Imogen looked in. The effort of the entrance had made her face pink and she stood for a moment biting her lip. When she noticed Flend, her face turned pinker. 'Oh, Uncle Andrew!' she said. She smiled, and her eyes disappeared while deep dimples quivered in her cheeks.

'Darling,' said Julia. She had been perched on the edge of her chair in her eager chat with Flend, but now she lay back, relaxing. 'Come in. Aren't you a bit late?'

'Yes, it was dancing.'

'Oh, so it was; I forgot.'

Imogen closed the door, approached and kissed her mother, and then Flend, who stared at her without finding anything to say, still not smiling, but with a trace

of anxiety in his cow-eyes as if he would have liked to say whatever was appropriate to little girls, had he any experience of them.

Imogen was not physically a 'little' girl. At twelve, she was an inch taller than her mother. She was thin as a broom handle all the way up. She wore long white socks and a trim tartan skirt, and her ash-blonde hair flowed silkily to her shoulders. Her face was irregular, with a blob of a nose and flexible mouth. Her voice had not yet formed; she did not speak so much as sing, on a shy flutey note. Now she stood with her hand on the back of the couch, beaming, silent.

Julia said gently: 'Well; what have you to say to us?'

Imogen thought hard. She came awkwardly round to the hearth rug and stood facing both the adults. When she had thought enough, she raised her head and took a long breath.

'We had drawing this morning. We had to draw some bananas. And then we painted them. They had green on. It was such a bright green. Bianca is back. She says it was quite cold in Rome and she went to an opera. She stayed up till midnight. Michelette is still away. We don't know what's the matter with her. We have our essays on the Crown Jewels back and I had six. Out of ten.' She dried up and glanced hopefully at her mother; would that do? Julia said: 'Thank you, darling.' She added in aside to Andrew: 'That's the Trebaldi child—he's in the Embassy, you know.' And to Imogen: 'Are you going to have some tea with us?'

'Oh—' said Imogen in a gasp, blushing again.

'Oh what?'

'Well, it's "Kidnapped" at five o'clock, you see . . .

'Yes. Well then, "No thank you, I want to watch my television serial."'

'M'm,' said Imogen, nodding. 'Can I?'

'Of course. Perhaps Uncle Andrew will pop up and see you before he goes. He might like to see your toy theatre.'

'Oh yes.'

'Off you go, then.'

Off Imogen went, closing the door quietly. Julia told Flend: 'She's coming along very well. I think we might leave her at Miss Fairlie's, you know. It's much better for her than a regular school. She's trying much harder with that shyness, but she still needs a lot of encouragement. Besides, Peter and I couldn't be without her. She's pure gold.'

Flend nodded.

'She's not terribly bright, but she's very neat with her fingers. And so patient. And so *calm*, for a young thing. At that age, I was always excited about one thing or another.'

Flend realized that some praise from him might be welcome. He cleared his throat. 'She's tall,' he offered at last.

'You're a fine one to say that.'

'I suppose so . . . Is that her school uniform?'

'They don't *wear* a uniform at Miss Fairlie's,' said Julia exasperated. 'It isn't really a *school*.'

'Perhaps I'd better go down and see what Peter wants.'

'Yes, do. And don't potter off without going to see Imogen's toy theatre, will you? Only not before half past five, if you can. She's taking such an interest in "Kidnapped". And pop up again and see me too, if I'm not in the bath by then. We've got these Americans coming at seven. In any case I'll see you again while you're in town?'

'Oh, rather,' said Flend a little confused. He hoisted himself length upon length up from the couch and balanced on his feet, looking down at Julia with absent kindness. 'Thank you for my tea,' he said, oblivious that he had not drunk it.

* * *

Peter Culfax was alone in his study when Flend came down at five past five. Peter was punctilious in his treat-

ment of his staff and kept to their hours however busy he might be. The casual tyranny to which Julia subjected hers slightly appalled him; but he had not been brought up, as she had, with plentiful servants. His staff served him punctiliously, while it seemed to him that Julia's tumbled over themselves to please her.

He came quickly round his desk to greet Flend, and waved him towards an armchair, himself dropping into another at the other side of the fireplace. 'This is good of you, Andrew . . . Do sit down . . . I didn't know you were in town.'

'Oh, hullo, Peter,' Flend said, recognizing him as if they were in a club lounge. 'Just for the night, to go to a Philological Society thing.' He collapsed his angles into the chair and let his blank gaze wander across the window curtains without passing between them to the strip of wintry garden.

Peter said: 'Philological . . . ?' with a slight frown, and then let it go. If he didn't immediately see what philology had to do with anthropology, he was always courteous enough to assume that it was he who was being stupid. 'How are you?'

Flend swivelled his eyes to Peter's face, focused with an effort, and said: 'You've had 'flu, Julia says.'

'Oh, that's cleared off now. Thanks.'

It had left traces, if Flend was not observant enough to see them. A hollowness under the eyes and a dryness of skin under the jaw made Peter look, if not older, at least over-ready for spring. He was restless. He had crossed his legs, twitched at his cuffs, lain back in the chair, straightened again, and now he said: 'What about a drink? Whisky . . . ?'

'No, thanks. We've barely had tea.'

'Of course. I don't, often. Weight, you know . . . ' He smiled at Flend, but if in appeal for sympathy, received none; not because Flend himself had no weight to speak of, but because Flend was again staring at the curtains ruminantly. Abstraction framed him like an open door-

way. Pursuing his attention Peter leaned forward: 'I wanted to talk to you, just for a moment, about something . . . confidential.'

The dismay in the bulbous eyes that swung briefly back to Peter was not altogether a trick of their shape. Peter, acute enough to see that, leaned back again, but fidgeted with his sleeve. He went on, unencouraged, and more casually: 'We've known each other for a long time. I know I can be frank with you. And you'll be equally frank with me. There's no one else I could . . . Well, there's no one but you who knows about this question I've had so much on my mind recently. I'd like to get it cleared up because a lot depends on it. I was going to write to you, hoping I'd be able to see you soon. I would have come up to . . .' He frowned his little frown again, because he couldn't off-hand remember where it was that Andrew lived nowadays. He had a fairly good head for detail, but where Andrew was concerned, detail in any case became obscure. It was Andrew's vagueness that was contagious; no one knew anything about him; it was doubtful that Andrew did.

Now he had approached, if not broached, the topic, Peter paused. Andrew waited, one hand cupping the back of his head. The two men, both gazing now at the electric fire, considered each other. They did know each other pretty well; but each had, in that context, a circumscribed meaning for 'well'. Neither would have fitted Julia's meaning for the word.

Peter thought: Andrew may be a muddle as a personality; in fact, heaven knows what kind of emotional life he has, if any; as a human being he's lacking; but he did go to the right kind of school. He knows the rules. He's got standards, and when it comes to a crisis he can be trusted to live up to them.

Andrew thought: Peter is a simple creature. Emotionally quite predictable. You always know what he's feeling, and it will be the *right thing* . . . But when I come to his mind, God knows what he's capable of. He could muddle

up his own values to allow for any jiggery-pokery . . . Well, I suppose, he's a politician. . . .

'You live so far out of the world nowadays,' said Peter smiling, 'but I expect you remember more than you admit. It's the past that's been bothering me.' He let the smile fade. 'In particular, our shared past. The time of GRAP. You remember?'

'Oh, rather.'

'Good. As a matter of fact, you'll understand, all this has been bothering me ever since. I haven't forgotten anything. Naturally I found it hard to mention it to you. But now, it becomes relevant, because there's a question of my taking up a post connected with African affairs again.'

'Oh. Yes, Julia said so,' said Flend, as if with an effort to be helpful.

'She did? What did she say?'

Flend thought for a long moment and offered: 'Well . . . just that.'

'I see. Julia advises me to take it, but then she doesn't know what my . . . reservations are. I expect *you* do, Andrew.'

Flend regarded him foggily.

'Need I explain?' Peter's tone was persuasive.

'I don't quite see . . .'

'Surely. The whole achievement of GRAP turned on the arrangement it made in Mwalalaland—as it then was—with its opposition party, about the site for the new dam. I needn't remind you. That was the key issue. And their prime minister, as he called himself, was doing all he could to obstruct the negotiations—'

'Old Joshua?' Flend hoisted himself up in his chair and, surprisingly, smiled. More surprisingly, he became voluble. 'Do you know where he is now? Living in Paris, driving about in a big shiny car with a new Japanese wife. Amazing old rogue. He calls himself a prince, too. Well, so he is, in translation. His grandson Mark is at Oxford and I see him sometimes. Brilliant boy, but a real

Sibhodo. I don't know that the situation there has settled down yet. It seems Rufus—the cousin—has bought that lot off, but one can't say how long it will last, with that family. They're all rather too clever for their own good. They've had Kwame—the uncle—in prison for five years, you know, which is asking for trouble. At least I suppose he's still in prison. He'll probably pop up in Moscow or somewhere—'

'Yes, yes,' said Peter. He did not share Flend's fascination with the Sibhodo family, whom he had thought a pack of savages. 'At any rate, you're still in touch with it all?'

'What all? I don't know. Now and then I hear odd news,' Flend went on half-smiling to himself, in reminiscence.

'I see. But, Andrew, my object in raising all this was to ask you . . . You can't have forgotten how I came by that vital information about the siting of the dam.'

'The sacred valley,' suggested Flend vaguely, 'with the tombs in caves, and all that stuff?'

'Stuff it may have been, but the issue turned on it.'

'Yes, it would. The Sibhodos saw to that. The valley was no more sacred to *them* than a farmyard. There may still be something in it, though. A university team went out two years ago to have another shot at exploring the valley, but their only results were—'

'Yes, yes. I'm sure the . . . what's-their-names . . . Sibhodos, on both sides, were simply making political capital of the dam question.'

'You see, there was a great infiltration of Moslems to that area during the thirteenth century, when the trade route—'

'Yes. Aside from all that, you must remember that you had the story in confidence from a member of the opposition party, and you told it to me in confidence, and that, in spite of that, I used it to . . . put an end to the situation.'

'It did, too,' said Flend amiably. 'Blew it wide open.'

Old Joshua was saving it up to confound us with when we—'

'However, I don't need to tell you I did commit a breach of confidence.'

He paused there, watching Flend; because that was the crux of it.

'So did I,' said Flend calmly. 'I remember. Ralph Sibhodo told me. And I passed it on to you.'

'But that was quite a different thing. You told me unofficially—as a joke, almost. As if these people were... friends of yours...'

'The Sibhodos are friends of nobody. Least of all each other.' The reminiscent smile brightened Flend's face again and Peter said with faint annoyance: 'I used the information officially, although I had it in confidence.'

'Well,' said Flend, reflecting, 'I dare say that was what Ralph intended. After all,' he added, unflatteringly, 'if I'd wanted to keep the story dark I ought not to have told you. It was my fault, if anybody's.'

Peter was still watching him. 'And what was your opinion of me, in all this?'

Flend goggled. The question seemed to make no sense at all to him. Peter, as if embarrassed, turned sideways in his chair, frowning and tweaking at a shoelace. There was a silence.

Flend finally broke it. This situation was, he felt, rather awful; what was Peter getting at? He made an effort in Peter's direction. 'It was... what?... Fourteen years ago...'

'That doesn't affect the principle.'

'Oh. No?... You mean, now that you're thinking of tangling with that crowd again... You think they didn't think any too highly of what you did?'

'I didn't concern myself with their opinion,' said Peter, still intent on his shoelace, and rather sulkily.

'No. Well, none of us came out of it too well. Though it all looked all right from the British angle. Everybody seemed satisfied and the government wasn't to know how

the Sibhodos had manipulated us . . . You really think old Joshua might set an assassin on to knife you in the guts?' The idea apparently amused him.

'It wasn't that that worried me.'

Then, asked Flend's foggy stare, what . . .? He failed to see why Peter had dragged any of this up. At the time he had not been at all surprised that Peter used Ralph Sibhodo's secret information as best suited his own ends. That was what one expected of Peter. Probably Ralph had expected it too. And now, nothing could be gained by going into the matter.

Peter talked about 'principle'; well, for that, thought Flend, it was rather late in the day. In spite of Peter's whole attitude, Flend quite failed to see a troubled conscience at work. He just did not associate Peter with 'principle' as he himself understood it. So he gazed, at a loss.

And Peter, receiving as it were the cold blast of non-comprehension from the other side of the fireplace, was chilled and disappointed. He should have known better than to appeal to Andrew. He had set up Andrew as some sort of judge, and submitted himself to that judgment with some courage. It had not been easy to bring all this up. Yet Andrew seemed to remember the whole issue, when it came to it, in detail but not in outline. All this gossipy interest in individual members of that tiresome family . . . And no grasp of the principle of the thing.

Conceivably Andrew's own principles were laxer than one had imagined. Or, conceivably, he was avoiding judgment on Peter? This was a disturbing notion. At this time of life, true emphasis had shifted from 'What I think . . .' to 'What I have done . . .' So this interview was awkward for them both.

Peter had not wanted it to be. He couldn't see how it had gone wrong after all his careful preliminary heart-searchings. He did not know quite what kind of reassurance he had been, and was, longing for; or why the longing had increased recently. So, flat and lonely, he

blamed Andrew. He had expected too much of Andrew; that was all.

'I shouldn't have bothered you with all this,' he said, smiling again, in control. 'As you say, the right steps were taken and no one was the worse for them. It's good to see you, anyway. I do hope you're staying to dinner?'

* * *

Outside the study, Flend stood gazing at a Chinese silk painting and stroking the back of his head. He was gazing at a river wide as the sky, shadowless scrub land at noon, the whole Joyce Cary scene of his youth; and it *had* been like that; Mr *Assistant ADO* Flend came bucketing across the compound on a bicycle whose handlebar grips and saddle were swathed in cotton; his saddlebags were stuffed with notebooks; the road plunged into a tunnel of solid forest and he was rehearsing in the dialect of the village: 'Er, could you possibly explain to me, if it isn't a nuisance...' In the idle time after harvest the village chief, somnolently amused, told off two elders to explain to the skinny white boy the burial customs of their ancestors; most of it they invented; Andrew enjoyed sifting the invention. They were amused by him and his questions. 'Why can't you,' asked Andrew's boss, 'go shooting or something, like other chaps?' Andrew did not know. His love of peoples had outstripped his love of people, but absorbed it.

The thirst for knowledge... he now thought, staring at a wicked-faced Chinese under willow trees, seeing the tolerant grins on black faces as he approached again, packets of peppermints in the front of his shirt. They don't seem to thirst nowadays. What's so different? Students, young people, they don't want to know. You have to shove it at them.

What *had* been different, possibly, was Andrew Flend; he was making the common mistake of assuming that

in his young days everybody of his age had been very much like himself.

Nowadays, they all thought alike. That is, they didn't think; they sought about for, waited for, the mental cliché of the moment and then attached themselves to that. They doubted nothing. Doubt belongs to faith, and that was out of fashion, it seemed.

Peter, for instance; he had to reduce a situation to acceptable terms; he looked at things not from within himself but from the outside in; how would 'they' see it? Peter was a child of these times, whatever his age.

Over the wicked Chinese face hovered the bland black dead-pan of Joshua Sibhodo. Flend smiled a little to himself. Now *there* was an original... He sunned himself in the African memory. Had been nice, talking about it all again with Peter. Reminded you, might have told Peter: remember that guest house where they shoved us for the weekend and they'd mislaid the mosquito nets... And that secretary bloke—Robinson?—who wanted to shoot a lion... The most engaging thing about the Mwalalalanders, he might have said to Peter, was always that they saw the lot of us as a howling joke... He did not wonder how Peter might have received this observation.

Flend himself knew he was a joke; he had known it since his prep school days, and any resentment of it had sunk into a limbo of his emotions. From this rose again a mild astonishment at any human being who could take itself seriously... Wickedness he quite admired; goodness he valued remotely; principles, carved on stone, he did not respect.

'Uncle Andrew!'

The husky-flute note sounded down the well of the banisters. He looked up at the moth-wings of Imogen's hair in the gloom.

'Hullo?'

'Are you coming to see my theatre?'

'Oh, rather.'

She ran down to meet him and danced up again ahead

of him, long and light. Flend began to pant a little as they climbed past the empty drawing-room, Julia's work-room where she seemed to be haranguing a girl in glasses, a bedroom where a fat woman could be seen shaking out a long yellow dress, a flight of hunting prints . . . 'It was lovely in "Kidnapped",' Imogen said. 'You see they were on top of a rock and the soldiers couldn't see them.'

'Who was on a rock?'

'David and the other man, I don't remember his name. Look, this is it. It's a ballet. The first act of *Sleeping Beauty*.'

'Oh.' Flend folded himself on to the floor with legs crossed. Imogen began fussing with lights. She brought a reading lamp to the length of its flex, propped a piece of red gelatine across it, and adjusted another lamp on the other side, covered in green.

When her stepsisters married and left home, the whole of this floor of the house had been adapted for Imogen. Two rooms had been knocked into one, so that her bed with its lilac valance, and lilac-frilled dressing-table, were far away by the rear window; and at the front of the room were her television set, desk, and armchairs. She drew the front curtains—also of lilac, which was her favourite colour at present—against the grey daylight, and came back switching on a battery torch.

'I have to hold this, you see, to be a spotlight, because I can't think of a way of fixing it up.'

'I'll hold it,' Flend volunteered.

'Oh, thanks. That would be lovely. Point it at the cradle—only not till I'm ready. Carabosse's wig has fallen off again . . .'

She knelt by the low table, working away with her large but gentle hands. Flend, absently scratching his chin with the torch, watched her and habitually pursued his own thoughts. Why had Julia said Peter wanted advice on his career? He hadn't asked for it. Imogen had put a lot of work into this. Very fiddling, too. The tiny dancers were neatly modelled in plasticine on wire, and dressed

in fabric or tissue paper. Well, Peter had murmured something about a new job, but hadn't followed it up. It wasn't like Julia to get hold of the wrong end of any stick.

'All right—*now*,' said Imogen. She switched on her lamps and Flend directed his torch beam. They regarded the effect in silence. Imogen, the artist, unchildlike, did not clamour for his opinion. Presently she said in a thoughtful tone: 'I needn't have made Carabosse's face in green if I was going to shine a green light on her.'

'Try her on the other side, in the red.'

Peter had changed, now one thought of it, since the days of GRAP. He wouldn't have waffled about principles fourteen years ago. Difficult to say what it was a sign of now.

'Oh bother, there goes her wig again . . .'

'How do you think your father would do in the Cabinet?' mused Flend aloud. He had never grasped that children had to be spoken to in special terms.

'What cabinet?' asked the M.P.'s daughter.

'Oh, the Right Hon., as opposed to My Learned Friend . . .'

Imogen glanced at him patiently, accepted that he was talking nonsense and to himself at that, and said: 'I've got a record I could play, but if they're not actually dancing, is there any point?'

'It might set the mood. But I think I get it without.'

'Well, I might for somebody else.' She did not explain what exempted Uncle Andrew. 'Now I ought to move the cradle over, too, though. Or I get the queen where I can't see her. I don't like her much anyway.'

Flend said: 'She wasn't much use, was she. If I'd been Aurora's mother I'd have made her wear boxing gloves all her life to make sure she couldn't be pricked.'

Imogen gave him a full attentive stare. When her attention was engaged, her eyes opened and darkened. Normally they were slitted up, in her beaming smile, her struggle with her shyness, or her efforts at concen-

tration. In the oblique red light of the lamp beside her she now looked intent and intelligent. She said: 'Yes, but it would have been awkward for her, wouldn't it. How could she have washed and things?'

'I suppose not.'

'Unless her servants did everything for her . . . I meant really, I don't like *my* queen. Her frock came out wrong.' She sat on her heels, considering her new grouping of characters.

'That would have been a dull life.' What had Peter actually intended to say? Flend began to feel perhaps he had been dense about something.

'Anyway, if it was a spell, not even her mother could have stopped it happening. Please, Uncle Andrew, shine the torch where the cradle is now. Or have you had enough?'

'Not a bit. Is that better . . .? I suppose if Peter has a destiny, even Julia couldn't stop it.'

'Daddy? He usually does what Mummy thinks. Maybe I won't do the next act. I'll do something different.' She bit her lip, planning.

'Not inevitably, he doesn't. I wouldn't swear to that.'

'What does "inevitably" mean?' She tilted her head and moved the green lamp a little nearer to the stage.

'Oh . . . Always.'

'M'm. I wish you could stay and have supper up here with me. I'm going to have scrambled egg.'

'I wish I could. Could you do "Les Sylphides"?'

'I might, but what a lot of the same kind of frock. Still it would look nice when it was done. And I could have a blue light. You do have good ideas, don't you, Uncle Andrew.'

'Not often,' he said modestly.

'Well, not perhaps about the boxing gloves. Mummy doesn't tell me what to do. She likes me to have my own ideas.'

'I'm sure you have plenty of those.'

She turned her dark-hazel stare on him again, possibly

surprised. 'Yes, I do, but I don't always tell people,' she confided.

'You do right. Ideas are to be acted upon, not talked about.'

'I wonder what I could make sylphides-frocks with. Nylon, I expect.'

'All the same, if Peter is having ideas, they aren't yet plain to me. Perhaps I'm not sympathetic.'

'I think you are,' said Imogen kindly.

'But then, so are you. That makes a difference... Supposing your mother and father had conflicting ideas,' he added, betrayed by Imogen's personality into personalities, 'I wonder whose side you'd be on?'

'What does "conflicting" mean?'

'Oh... Different.'

'I'd be on both,' said Imogen, serenely and without hesitation. She knelt up to the stage again. 'Carabosse's wig is too stiff, that's all that's the matter with it. I might make her a new one. In silk.'

3

'I'm so rarely in at this time,' said Julia two days later. 'I can't *tell* you how glad I am you waited.' She threw her gloves on to a coffee table. Outside, sunlight whipped the twigs of the plane beyond the balcony rail. 'Sit down, do. They'll bring tea... What does Howard think about this chartering question? Peter says it will come to a free vote in the end.'

Celeste Ransome said a little guiltily: 'I had my feet up on your lovely couch, actually. And I still can't find a shoe... Shopping, you know. I've had my mother up—'

'My dear, I do know,' sympathized Julia. 'Leave them off... And by the way, who's going to be at Witherington for Easter?'

'You come upstairs like a bomb,' grumbled Celeste, putting on the retrieved shoe and sitting decorously in a chair. 'I haven't asked Howard; he's more taken up with that fisheries thing.'

'Yes, you must tell me about that. What about Witherington?'

'Well, the Ewens aren't, for one. So Roy told Stella.'

'Really. Of course we have to spend the whole recess at Curton, usually. It's a bore, but Imogen has her pony... Yes, Swann?'

'It's a Mr Felix James, Lady Culfax.'

'Who on earth... Oh, Felix. In person?'

'In the hall, yes.'

'How amazing. Celeste, *would* you mind? Evidently it's this child—and I *did* ask him to call, weeks ago—'

'No, no. Of course.'

Julia went out after Swann. It would be friendlier to go and meet the boy, who might be shy. A shade of Imogen's daily solo entry into the drawing-room, on which Julia gently insisted, still made her aware of its

alarms. At the top of the stairs she very nearly exclaimed aloud: *Julian!*

It was all the odder, because she had just about forgotten what Julian looked like. But when she saw that burly figure climbing the stairs behind Swann, she was taken back, as well as aback. It was something about the rolling movement, and the wide shoulders . . . and, too, the face, as he raised it, in the dim light of the high window. Blunt and colourless and sleepy . . . 'Hello,' she said.

'Mr James, Lady Culfax.'

'Hello,' said Felix, not offering a hand.

'But I don't see how you can be,' protested Julia leading the way into the drawing-room. There she stared at him. Felix stood with his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, staring at Celeste, the piano, and then the David Cox over the fireplace. 'You're only . . . How old is it?'

'I'll be seventeen in July.'

'I suppose it's possible . . .' Possible, too, that he could be so enormous at that age. Part of it was the jacket and part the shock of yellow hair, not too recently washed, falling in spikes over the collar. 'Well,' said Julia, 'It's nice to see you . . . This is Felix James, son of old friends of mine . . . Mrs Ransome.'

'Good afternoon,' said Celeste. Felix nodded at her.

'Sit down, Felix. We're just going to have tea. Now,' she went on, rallying, 'tell us about yourself. Your mother said you were in town.'

'Yes. She told me to come and see you.' Felix sat down on the couch with his legs comfortably stretched in front of him and his hands still in pockets.

'I'm glad she did. It's taken you a long time.'

'Oh, I dunno.'

That seemed unanswerable. His accent was not prepossessing. His shoes were worn and dusty . . . Could he be actually in need? 'She told me you were at college, but didn't say which.'

'Which?'

'Which college.'

'Oh. Music.'

'Royal College of Music?' cried Julia.

'M'm.'

'But that's marvellous. Marvellous, I mean, that you should turn out to be musical. Julian must be delighted. And you're very young to have got in. Are you doing well? Who's teaching you?'

'Bloke called Richards, or something.'

'I haven't heard of him. Is he good?'

'No.'

The tea trolley chattered in. Julia, liking Felix a good deal better now that she knew he was musical, almost wished Celeste were not here. 'Please, Felix, help yourself... Celeste, a sandwich?... Do tell me who *is* going to Witherington—Felix will excuse us...'

Felix did not say so. He turned round a plate of cakes and selected a coconut igloo, into which he bit, strewing fragments.

'... And you go home for Easter, I suppose?' Julia added to him, including him.

'I might.' He took an éclair.

The door half opened, hesitated, and Imogen entered.

She had known there were, as nearly always, people. Swann had said Mrs Ransome, and a man's name Imogen didn't know. When her French *au pair*, Jeanne-Marie, had collected her from Miss Fairlie's, they had gone to buy half a yard of white nylon for the Les Sylphides frocks, and Imogen was longing to start on them. But she had combed her hair and come in, blushing, to say: 'Good afternoon Mrs Ransome. Hello, Mummy.'

'Darling.'

'You're taller than ever,' squealed Mrs Ransome who had not seen her for about a fortnight. Imogen smiled, lowering her eyes. Her mother said: 'This is Felix. Imogen.'

'Good afternoon,' said Imogen.

He stared at her briefly, chewing.

'Imogen must be about the age of your younger sister, Felix?' Julia suggested.

'Fen? She's fourteen, I think.'

'Oh; Imogen's not thirteen till September.'

'You'd never think so to look at her,' persisted Mrs Ransome, a woman of few ideas in Imogen's view.

'Well, darling; what have you got to tell us?'

Imogen thought, drew breath, and told them that Michelette was back, having had a cold; that they had been for a walk in Kensington Gardens; that they had had to learn a new poem in French.

'And are you going to recite it to us?' asked Mrs Ransome.

Imogen blushed scarlet and shook her head. She dried up.

Julia said: 'My dear Celeste, reciting went out with player/pianos. Are you going to have some tea with us, darling, or are you busy?'

Imogen had noticed that this Felix man had taken no notice at all of her and her speech, or of Mrs Ransome. She was grateful to him. But he looked a bit grubby. Not really Mummy's usual kind of person for teatime.

'I've got some sewing . . .' she mentioned.

'Off you go, then.'

She went, closing the door quietly. In the pause, Julia and Celeste heard her footsteps bounding lightly upstairs, and Felix slurping tea. Celeste said: 'She's a sweet creature.'

Julia's eyes glowed at her. 'More tea, won't you?'

'Actually I ought to fly, really. We're going to the Fernbys' and I haven't a thing ready for my committee in the morning.'

Julia glanced doubtfully at Felix, who showed no sign of flying. She turned to Celeste and raised her eyebrows in perplexity; Celeste winked.

'I'll telephone you very soon.'

'Do that, my dear.'

Already Julia knew enough of Felix's manners not to expect him to rise as Celeste left the room. Alone with him, she wondered whether he *were* shy, at all. He did not so much shrink from his surroundings as show no interest in them. He sat there on the couch as if about to settle down and sleep off those cakes.

She had her own theories about the young nowadays, and why they became younger every year, until it even became the fashion for them to rebel against authority, not positively as *her* generation had, but by sitting down on the floor like three-year-olds. She was, up to a point, tolerant. She could well imagine that someone as vague as Julian, assisted only by someone as ineffectual as Olwen, would bring up children in the style then called 'permissive'. It would have been the cant word in Wolverhampton, or wherever it was, during the last decade. Even so she did not see why this boy need actually *smell*. It came in wafts from the warmth of the fire; somewhere between a lion's cage and the floor of a railway carriage.

Of course, as Julia had pointed out, her own lifetime had seen the emancipation of the lower classes. The girls who were at universities nowadays would have been in domestic service fifty years ago; and they had brought their morals with them. Similarly Julian, and his son, would have found no scope for musical gifts in the era even of Julian's father. She was all for social change, as long as it was thorough. It was an excellent thing for Felix to have opportunity, but it would be more excellent if he were to rise to it.

However. Her thoughts were in danger of becoming uncharitable. It was only that she had looked forward to a good gossip with Celeste . . . 'Are you,' she asked Felix in a friendly voice, 'a wind player, like your father?'

'No. Piano.'

'Really?' Her interest revived. 'I studied piano myself, when I was younger. I didn't go to college, of course. I had private lessons. I haven't kept it up much; I've had too many other interests, I'm afraid . . .'

This struck no spark. It occurred to her that he might be *good*? If he were, that might excuse much. Of course he must be good, to a point, to have got into the College; but Julia valued the 'something extra', rare and brilliant. How marvellous if this unlikely specimen should have it. At once her optimism decided that he had.

She said: 'Would you like to try my piano?' She had

more delicacy than to phrase it: Would you like to play to me? He said nothing, but stood up; so she went and opened the piano, unassisted.

'At least I keep it tuned,' she remarked, perching for a moment to run up and down an arpeggio in E flat, which was her favourite key . . . The sound startled the quiet room, and the windy sunlight outside brightened. She must play more often. She was reminded unexpectedly of the joy of it.

Felix took her place, casually licking his finger tips and wiping cream and coconut on to his jeans. He plunked a finger on middle C and then slid his hands apart and back in a contrary motion chromatic scale, with a casual deep incisiveness as if he slit open the very piano to its bowels. The instrument thrilled like a woman to an intimate touch. 'Bloody good gone,' he observed. He began to pound out octaves in the bass, stopped and played the last few bars of a Schubert impromptu, tested the pedals for a while, like a man driving a new car, then gave it full throttle and a burst of Liszt. Stopping that, he incongruously and delicately began Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*. 'D'you know how Lipatti plays this?' he said. 'Chords like striking a match . . .' He broke off and hammered violently at top D sharp, which for some reason had not pleased him.

Well, said Julia to herself, arrested in the middle of the room with her arms folded. I hoped he'd be good but didn't expect him to be as good as *that*.

He was not showing off. He was unaware of his audience. In this context, his obliviousness pleased her.

'You're *good*,' she told him.

'I know.' He was vamping out *La Paloma*, very splurgy, but the piano knew he was only teasing and purred back at him. 'Finger work needs a lot of practice though.'

'What do they say about you,' Julia asked, 'at the College?'

'Nothing.'

'I'd have thought you were outstanding.'

'Not at that place. Nobody is.'

'Oh, but surely—'

'It's a waste of bloody time,' said Felix austerely, tinkling out a section of a Mozart rondo after the style of a little girl.

'What do you *want* to do?'

'Play the piano.'

'I meant, in the end?'

'That.'

'Who's your favourite composer?'

'If it comes to taking sides I'm a Mozart man. I can do with a lot of Prokofiev—Bartok; never much went for *Rachmaninov* . . .' He spat the name in parody of romanticism.

'Yes, I do agree . . . But why is college a waste of time? Tell me.'

Felix merely snorted. He rolled off the piano stool and stretched his arms. Away from the piano, he was a bulky and uncouth young man again, and Julia caught again the lion-railway smell. But she knew now that something must be done about him.

'Where are you living in town?' she began, sitting on the stool with her back to the keyboard.

'Islington.' He had wandered back to the tea-trolley and taken another cake. He was not, really, much like Julian. His mouth was firmer and he had more chin.

'In digs?'

'Sort of. They give me breakfast.'

'Nobody seems to look after you much,' she accused him. He did not answer, but went on chewing. 'And how much piano tuition do you get at the college?'

'Oh . . . Once a week.'

'And you have to do extra things—second subject and harmony, and all that?'

'Suppose so.'

Her intuition told her that Felix did not take the college very seriously at all. 'You're too young, you know, really, to be in town on your own. Have you a lot of friends?'

'No.'

'What do you . . . Are you on a grant?'

'M'm.'

'What kind of lessons did you have before you came to town?'

Felix said impatiently: 'One bloke at school was all right, but he left. So then they made me do my O Levels, maths and all that crap. After a bit I thought, if I really wanted to play, I'd better get to a college or somewhere to get a bit of peace.'

Julia sorted this out. (At least he was more forthcoming now.) She gathered that this boy, nursing what he himself understood to be genius, had had an on-and-off career at the hands of provincial grammar school masters . . . 'But didn't your parents encourage you?' she broke out. 'You must have shown when you were quite small what promise you had. Why didn't they send you to someone like Fanny Waterman, or—'

Felix snorted again. 'We're poor, you know,' he said with heavy irony. 'And this isn't the Soviet Union.'

'What has the Soviet Union to do with . . . Oh; special schools for musical children, and so on? No; I see.'

He turned his back, picked up a Rockingham cottage from the mantel-shelf, twiddled it carelessly and dropped it into another place. 'Oh yes, I was an infant bloody prodigy. But they all have a down on that kind of thing . . . you know . . . I thought of engineering, for a bit. I mean if I can't do music as *I* want to I'd rather bloody chuck it altogether.'

He still might; that was clear from his whole attitude. Julia did not honestly think that 'They' had a down on infant prodigies. But something had gone wrong. Felix had been too all-or-nothing; he was disappointed in the Royal College of Music so probably didn't bother to show his ability there. It could all be disastrous.

'You need taking in hand,' she said briskly. 'You need more freedom and a really good teacher and an occasional bath. And you've got to persevere, Felix. I mean that. You've got something more than talent, and you know it,

but you've got to help it along. I wish I could . . .' She thought. She suddenly conceived a quite desperate ambition for this boy. She let it come to the boil and said: 'Balkan.' 'What?'

'Moshe Balkan. I studied under him once.'

'*You* did?' The tone was sceptical.

'Yes, I did. What's more I once played the last movement of the Mozart seventeenth with the Chamber Orchestra with him breathing down my neck . . . The startling's tune, you know?'

'Of course I know.'

Julia had swivelled round to the piano. She began to play . . . Yes, how amazing; she still remembered it. The touch of youth was in her fingers again. After a minute she checked herself and turned back to Felix, who was watching her coldly. Of course, he would think her playing quite dreadful. But she was not discouraged. 'I'll see if he'll give you a few lessons. How would that be?'

'Balkan? Ha bloody ha.'

'No, listen. He's in London. He—'

'I know. I heard him playing the Beethoven fourth at the Festival Hall on Tuesday.'

'Oh, you are lucky. We had to go to some awful banquet . . . Anyway, I can ask him. He knows how much work and money I've put into his charity, for one thing—that home for disabled musicians, you know? If I can get him to hear you, will you play for him?'

Felix was looking at her with a strange expression; scepticism was overlaid by a lowering fury. 'You talk like an idiot,' he snarled, and Julia felt that was the first friendly approach he had made to her since he appeared.

'We'll see,' she said gaily. 'Now come and play me something. Something you like.' She was not surprised when he obeyed; already she had begun to make contact with him.

Later, Peter looked in, into a sudden silence following the end of a Chopin sonata. 'My dear,' he said. ' . . . Oh; I'm sorry, I thought you were alone—'

'You thought that was *my* playing?'

She laughed. Felix glanced at Peter with mild contempt and Julia could see that Peter, after a scrutiny, beneath his courtesy returned the sentiment. 'It was just,' said Peter, 'that Hewett is clucking after you rather... She tells me that if we're to be at the reception at seven, you should be dressed by now...'

Peter himself was dressed. He advanced to shake Felix's hand as they were introduced and Felix, without rising, shoved a paw in his direction.

'Stay and practise here for a while if you want to, Felix,' Julia invited him. 'But I'll have to go... Are you on the telephone? I'll get in touch with you...'

She and Peter left the house shortly after to the distant thunder of Brahms. 'He's got a wide repertoire,' commented Julia. In the car she said seriously: 'Julian has made a mess of bringing up that boy. I might have known he would.'

* * *

Once Julia began a thing she liked to go through with it, as she said of herself; and: 'I *do* go through with things, too, which is why my life is such a whirl...' Although she had plenty on hand at the moment, she made time to track down Moshe Balkan and whirl in on him in a furnished flat he had taken for the present in Hampstead.

'This country is tolerable in spring,' Balkan said. He wore a brown knitted cardigan and battered slippers. He was to be here, except for odd hops to New York and Paris, for two or three months. Yes, he remembered Julia. 'The way you called me "maestro",' he said, 'it always tickled me...'

He had begun as a child prodigy himself and was still under fifty. He was still having treatment, on and off, for that bothersome strain in his arm. Otherwise he was happy. He had a son at Cornell, and two grandchildren.

'So what do you want?' he asked, slyly smiling, and Julia took him up at once, appreciating his frankness.

'I've got a pupil for you, maestro.'

'Too bad.'

'No, do listen . . .' She told him about Felix. ' . . It would help him so tremendously as a *person*, I know, if you'd just *hear* him . . . He's got so much potential and hasn't found the outlet . . .'

'Well, but I'm not a psychiatrist . . .'

'Surely one doesn't need to be a psychiatrist to give *personal* help when it's so much needed and one so easily can? Heaven knows where I would be if that kind of cold-hearted attitude had held me back . . . I just know that you're the one person who could get through to him . . .'

'Look, Julia, if I spent my time getting through to half the young geniuses who depend on encouragement—'

'Oh, I know, I'm asking far too much—but Felix isn't one of those dependent types. You'll see.'

It ended, as she had been sure it would, in Balkan's agreeing to hear Felix in two days' time. Mrs Balkan brought coffee and said it would be lovely to spend a weekend at Curton some time. Then off rushed Julia to prepare Felix for the encounter.

She told her chauffeur to find that address in Islington, which in the end he did; and Felix was at home, lying on a rumpled divan in a tip of a room that smelt of gas fires, old cheese and Felix. He was reading a Western strip cartoon book and wearing his leather jacket and socks out of which his toes protruded; he could have done with a shave, and his eyes were bleary.

'This won't do,' said Julia in disgust. 'The maestro will think I'm giving him a rehabilitation case. Anyway, Felix, in your own interest you must learn the elements of manners. At least make some *movement* towards getting up when a lady comes into the room. What else have you got to wear?'

When he understood that he was to play to Moshe Balkan, Felix did get up from the divan. With a lofty

patience he let himself be led to an outfitter's and even to a barber's. Julia left him there with instructions to turn up at her house in time for dinner; and so, as she had confidently expected, he did. She sent him off to eat with Jeanne-Marie in the housekeeper's room and ordered the bed in the green guest room to be made up for him. 'You may as well stay here for tomorrow, and get a bit of practice in, as well as a bit of rest.' With this instruction she left him to it; she wasn't going to fuss over him.

Nor, of course, would she accompany him to his meeting with Balkan. In any case she had other things to do that day. But she was in time to see him off, and he was looking quite respectable, in his new high-necked black sweater and with his flaxen mop trimmed. 'What are you going to play?' she asked.

'I dunno,' said Felix with a massive indifference that she could not help respecting.

'Mind your manners, now,' she told him, teasing, and he almost smiled.

Two days passed. Hewett asked: 'What am I to do with these . . . garments from the green guest room, Lady Culfax?'

'Well, I'd supposed the boy was coming back . . . I think anyway they might be washed for him.'

'If they'll stand it,' said Hewett gloomily.

Next day Julia, on impulse, had herself driven to Islington on her way back from a charity bazaar. She might, in this case, have brought his shirt and what-not, but she was blowed if she was going to arrive with a bundle of washing. As it was . . . As it was, she was simply curious, and admitted it. The same slattern let her in. Felix was prowling about his room today, smoking, wearing the black sweater which from the look of it had been slept and eaten in for a week.

'You might have let me know,' she began, softening a little, because whatever Balkan had said must have disappointed him for all his self-assurance.

'Oh. Yes, I was going to,' he said vaguely. He was, she decided, just as bad as Julian after all.

'Well . . . ?'

'He said what I expected. Finger work's weak. I'm to go to him on Thursday mornings except next week when it's Wednesday because he's going to . . . I dunno. I've got it written down somewhere.' He flapped a grubby hand at the muddle on his table.

'You mean he's taken you *on*? Oh, that's marvellous.'

'The thing is, I do need a decent piano to work on. Can I use yours?'

'I don't see why not. We're mostly out during the day, and if Peter's in, he's in his study, and the sound doesn't carry so far. Swann will let you in. I'll tell him about it.'

She telephoned Balkan to thank him. 'Do you think he's good, really, maestro?'

'Sure. You've got something out of the ordinary there.'

'Oh, I was sure you'd think so. I'm not much of a judge, of course, but I knew at once he was exceptional. He's thrilled to bits,' she added diplomatically, 'that you're taking him on for a while.'

'I bet,' said Balkan.

'Well, he's rather reserved, you know . . . It's a kind of single-mindedness that you *do* get with genius, don't you?'

'Incidentally, this particular genius charges a pretty single-minded fee for lessons nowadays you know.'

'Yes, of course. I'll see to that . . . I'm terribly grateful.'

'I hope your young friend is.'

'Oh, one doesn't expect gratitude from someone like that. I hope I'm above that kind of selfishness.'

'I hope he knows how you appreciate his character.'

Balkan's sly smile was audible. Julia asked: 'Did *you* find him a difficult character?'

'He's single-minded, let's put it that way. His character isn't likely to bother me. If it does I'll throw him out. They're all like that, these young geniuses. I don't know how much good it will do this specimen to be taken up by a . . .' his smile was heard again ' . . . rich patron?'

'Oh, I can handle that, maestro. I know all about his background and I know his parents. Thank you for your interest, though.'

'That's fine, then.'

It seemed to be. Peter said a few days later: 'Why is that unsavoury lout always in and out of the house?'

'Felix? He practises. Does it disturb you?'

'No. No, I don't hear him. As long as you know what's going on . . .'

The drawing-room was hardly in use during the day, and its door was very solid, and there were no cigarette burns on the piano. Julia was out a great deal just then, and did not meet Felix. She heard no complaints from the servants. The whole arrangement seemed quite practicable.

For a week or two, having so much else on her mind, she left Felix to get on with it. She had done all she could for him for the present.

* * *

Balkan's spring was delayed at the beginning of March by a series of snowstorms, but after that the skies broke into clear blue, the plane tree's bubbles danced in a fresh wind, and a strong new sunlight showed up the tiredness of Peter's face. He sat opposite Julia at the breakfast table, picking away without enthusiasm at half a grapefruit. Normally Julia had breakfast in her room but today she was to go out soon; hurriedly she was bringing Peter up to date with the current household problems. They had little chance at any time of continuous conversation.

'... So if the girl's father is ill, there's nothing else for it. Hewett can take Imogen to school and collect her for a while, and in any case we shall be going to Curton so soon; we can do without an *au pair* till we come back. It's a pity; Jeanne-Marie has been one of our most successful ones.'

'What about booking her flight, and all that?'

'Oh, Pat will see to it—Darling, sometimes I think that

in your very *kindness* you bother yourself with unnecessary details.'

He said nothing, and she went round the table to stand behind him, her hands on his shoulders. 'Was I snappish? It's just because I'm worried... Here you are, jabbing away at that luscious grapefruit for half an hour, as if it were such an effort—'

'It's a very good grapefruit. I'm not hungry, that's all.'

'It isn't all.' She kissed the top of his head. 'You're not sleeping too well, are you? And you haven't regained any of the weight you lost with that wretched 'flu.'

'Just as well.' He slid a hand up to pat hers.

'Not on your face, it isn't. What about seeing Dr Mills again?'

'No, no. I'm perfectly well. I must say I quite look forward to the recess, though. And getting into the country.'

'Why?'

'Well... naturally...'

'No, I know you always like being at Curton, but there's something special, isn't there? Something worrying you?'

'It's been a long winter,' said Peter, perfunctorily. He laid down his spoon and glanced towards the hot plate. Julia hurried to it and arranged bacon, mushrooms and tomato carefully on a plate for him.

'Yes, well, why don't we have a real break?' she said vigorously. 'Daddy would lend us the villa, any time—'

'I'd just as soon Curton, really.'

'I know you would.' She set the plate in front of him and drew up another chair, to sit beside him and watch him eat. 'It's that African thing, isn't it,' she said in a persuasive voice. 'How long can you let it dangle?'

'There's no immediate hurry.'

'I can't help feeling *you'd* feel a lot better if it were settled.'

'Well, perhaps... We'll talk it over when we get down to Curton, shall we? Aren't you supposed to be going out now?'

'But this is such a big decision. The rest of your life could turn on it.'

'That's why I want to take time to think about it.'

'Yes, but...' She paused, and moved the toast rack nearer to him. 'I didn't ask you; but was it Andrew who advised you against it?'

'Against...? No. No, Andrew didn't give me any advice at all. What made you think I had consulted him about it?'

'Oh, I only wondered. I didn't actually suppose you would consult anyone as dim as Andrew about anything important.'

'No. I'm very fond of Andrew, but I don't see him as a political expert. Did he tell you what we talked about?'

'I haven't seen him since. Did you talk about anything in particular?' And as Peter frowned slightly, forking bacon into his mouth: '—I'm not wanting to know, of course. I just thought it rather odd that you sent for him like that, instead of coming up... He's quite out of this world nowadays, isn't he; but he has a kind of hazy wisdom of his own.'

'You think so?'

'In a way... But I don't see why we're discussing Andrew's character at this time of the morning. Will you be in to lunch?'

'I don't expect so. Not today.'

'Well, dearest, please *eat* something, wherever you are.' As she stood up she noticed how bowed his shoulders seemed. He sat there politely stuffing in bacon, politely talking to her, but deep in him she sensed a lethargy. Her own vitality had no reflection. It troubled and vaguely saddened her. She reached out impulsively and stroked his cheek, as if afraid a space had widened between them. The contact did not entirely reassure her.

'Have a good day,' Peter said, politely.

Leaving the room she suddenly glanced back; he sat as expressionless as if he had already forgotten her.

Felix, kneading his knuckles at the end of the Schumann, noticed the clock and that he had overshot his time. Hell. He jumped up from the piano, listening; the house was silent. He crossed the drawing-room, pussyfooted in spite of his bulk, and peered up and down the pavement. Nobody about.

Lucky, that her ladyship hadn't happened to come in for her afternoon cupper. He'd have to be more careful. At the moment he wasn't too keen on running into her ladyship or anyone else around the house. Everything was going well enough for the present, except for this bloody pulpiness in his fingers. He wanted to get a bit of work done before questions were asked. All he wanted was peace, but he knew one didn't easily come by that. He hoped to stretched the present as far as possible before it collided with the future.

God, the wealth scattered around here . . . He hesitated in front of a glass-fronted cabinet. Must be fifty of those little snuff-boxes on that shelf—and fifty or so paperweights on the shelf below. Those were pricy; now honestly, how often were they counted . . . ?

Oh, stuff that. Would only lead to ructions. Still, it was a possibility . . . He put it to the back of his mind, as he put a good many possibilities, against emergency. To get what he must get, Felix knew he would stop at just about nothing. Nothing mattered, except the rightness of his objective.

What did matter at the moment, and he observed it as he opened the drawing-room door, was that he was hungry. It was a great ugly griping hunger, right down in his belly. And, God, think of all the food there must be, stashed away in a house like this . . . He'd managed to get

old sourpuss butler to come through with a cup of coffee midway through each morning, by telling him Lady Culfax had suggested it, but he hadn't quite the nerve to tell him Lady Culfax had suggested a whacking great feed at midday. You couldn't tell how cute she was; quite likely the type who went through her housekeeping books with a toothcomb.

Someone was running up the stairs. Felix drew back, then it came to him that here might be a possibility: the French girl. She had been decent enough while he was staying here.

It wasn't the French girl either; it was the kid. This was even more possible. In fact, it was a good idea. Kids were, to Felix, his sister Fen; one could boss them about.

'Hey,' he said.

Imogen paused. She blushed. She said: 'Good afternoon.' She pulled off her velvet beret and clutched it to her chest, wondering what he wanted. She knew it was Felix, but had forgotten his other name—Mister what? He was looking at her so severely that she quailed, leaning back against the banister. He said: 'Can you swipe me something to eat? I'm starving.'

'C-can I . . . what?'

'Grub,' he said impatiently. 'Food.'

'Oh. Are you hungry?'

'I bloody am.'

'W-well, it's—Isn't it tea time? Mummy will—'

'Look,' he said, 'this is between us. I don't want Mummy to know I'm starving. So just you nip down to the kitchen and bring a hunk of bread or something. Say you want to feed the birds.'

Imogen, trembling, protested: 'But why d-don't you want Mummy to—'

Felix grabbed a handful of her hair, gave it a firm tug that rocked her head, and said: 'You do as you're told.'

No one had spoken to Imogen like that in her life. She was as much fascinated as frightened. As she scuttled, docile, down the stairs again she was already thinking:

It's like a television play. Like gangsters . . . I'm going to steal something for an escaped prisoner . . .

She would have had no idea how to set about stealing anything. In any case, this was her own house. By the time she arrived in the kitchen she was enjoying the situation and had it all arranged, what she would do. She was so innocent that she could not imagine what a double-bluff her innocence was. She went through to the pantries and found a loaf, half a pound of butter, an egg and some grapes, which she piled into a bowl.

'What are you doing?' asked Frasquita indulgently.

'I want to cook something. Can I have some bacon please, Frasquita?'

Felix had had a better idea than he knew. When Imogen came up the stairs again, balancing her provisions against her chest, she peeped to right and left and whispered: 'Come up to my room.'

When Imogen's floor of the house was remodelled, it had been Julia's idea to make a little kitchenette up there. Imogen was good at practical things, and might like to potter about and learn some simple cooking. Besides, while they were about it, they might as well make a little flatlet of it, in case she wanted to be independent when she was older. So, to Felix's surprise, when he followed the kid upstairs, she opened a door beside a blue-tiled bathroom to reveal a pink-tiled small kitchen, with stove and all the works.

'Blimey,' he said.

Imogen tied on a pink apron, carefully. She loved her little kitchen, and when Michelette or someone came, they would make rock buns or pastry by the hour. Everything was very tidy. She said: 'I've never actually cooked real food for anybody before . . . So I hope it will be nice . . .'

'Get on with it,' said Felix. He jammed himself in the corner on the little pink stool, tore a third of the loaf off and ate it with grapes as he watched her efforts. 'Gawd, you aren't going to fry that in butter, are you?'

Imogen turned on him her intent, open-eyed gaze. 'Is that wrong? What ought it to be?'

'It *will* be fine, never mind. For them as can afford it.' The bacon sizzled in its golden juice. 'Turn it over,' directed Felix. '--Here, let me--' as Imogen drew back nervously from the sputtering. 'What did they say downstairs when you swiped this lot?'

'What does *swipe* mean?'

'When were you born, sister?'

'I'm twelve and a half, nearly.'

'What did they say your name was? Have you got a plate?'

'Imogen. What's your name, please?'

'Felix--Yes, that'll do. Let me break the egg in . . .'

'Yes, but Mister what?'

'Felix to you, seeing you're saving my life.'

'I don't think I've got a plate that's big enough, Mr Felix.'

'Never mind, Miss Imogen, I can eat out of the pan.'

'Can you? Oh, but I haven't got knives and forks up here. You see I don't usually make proper meals. I'll go down and get--'

'What's the matter with that knife you cut the bacon with? And my fingers.' Felix fell to. Imogen watched, chin on fists on the edge of the table.

'Goodness,' she said, 'you *are* hungry.'

'So would you be,' said Felix with his mouth very full, 'if you were living in my circumstances.'

'What circumstances?'

'Oh well . . . I'm supposed to be at college but I'm not.'

'Mummy said you were learning the piano from somebody famous.'

'M'm, well, nobody gives me a grant for that. So I've only got what's in hand, and when they discover I've skipped the college my grant will stop, and I dare say my father will cut up, but if I can keep afloat till I've had my lessons from Balkan, that's all I care about.'

Imogen was puzzled. She fell back on what she could

observe of his situation. 'Would you like some more to eat?'

'Have you got anything?'

She knelt in front of her cupboard. 'Sultanas . . . I could make some rock buns . . .'

'Sultanas'll do.' He scooped them out of the tin, and polished off the bread.

'I never saw anybody eat a whole loaf before,' marvelled Imogen.

'You've led a sheltered life, sister.'

'Why do you call me sister?'

'Term of speech. Call me brother if you like.'

Imogen blushed with pleasure. She found this Mr Felix increasingly fascinating. And how did he know that it had always been her most secret wish, to have a brother? He was eating food she had cooked, really liking it, and he was telling her his secrets. 'I won't tell anybody,' she ventured, 'what you told me, or about how you came here, if you don't want me to.'

'You're a good kid,' said Felix, replete and benign.

'Not even Mummy?'

'Not for the moment. She'd only write to my father and there'd be a stink.'

It was not surprising that Imogen failed to understand his circumstances; Felix himself was a bit confused. The thing was, to keep the adult world from fussing, just for these few weeks, till the miracle of Balkan was safely over. Felix's very single-mindedness tended to over-concentrate his vision and limit its range; he could not look far ahead. At the moment, full of food, he was restored to confidence. 'Friday tomorrow,' he mused. 'And then the bloody weekend again. Oh, Lord.' Two days of no piano; it was insufferable. But her ladyship had not offered her drawing-room for Saturdays and Sundays and you couldn't blame her, really. He was afraid to sneak into the college any more either, to the practice rooms, because they must be wondering by now . . . 'It's time I went,' he said. 'Got to be at that bloody pub by opening time.'

'A pub?' echoed Imogen, dismayed.

'I work there. Washing up. All I could find. Damn-all it pays, either. And look what it's doing to my hands, soaking them in water for hours a night...'

Imogen looked. She stretched out her neck without coming too close, as if a lion had asked her to examine its paws. She was not too sure yet of her imaginary brother. 'They look nice and clean,' she said anxiously.

Felix snorted. Imogen stepped back.

'Why do you work there if you don't like it?'

'Otherwise what would I use for money, you nit.'

'Oh. I see. You haven't got any money?'

'That wouldn't occur to you, would it. I've got my digs paid up for two more weeks, but it doesn't stretch to much grub.'

'Is grub food?'

'God, where do you go to school?'

'At Miss Fairlie's.' She twined her fingers together; she had never minded so much in her life that she wasn't clever. 'Felix... If you like, would you like me to cook you some more grub another day?'

'You'd better,' said Felix in his gangster voice.

She beamed at him, lowering her eyes. 'And I won't tell anybody. You see Jeanne-Marie has gone home now, because her father was ill, so nobody minds much what I do. I mean if I want to play with my cooking things, they'll think that's all right. I can s-swipe grub from the kitchen and they won't mind—Oh, but we're going down to Curton in a week or two, I think. What will you do then?'

'We'll meet that when we come to it. Now, you just scout down the stairs, so I don't meet anybody on the way out.'

They were lucky. Voices sounded faintly behind the closed door of the drawing-room, but no one was about. Felix went rolling off along the pavement, and Imogen went back upstairs. Smoothing her hair, she made her entrance into the drawing-room.

'Darling,' said Julia. 'Why the apron?'

'I've been cooking,' said Imogen, shyly radiant. 'Good afternoon, Mr Jennings . . .'

'This is Imogen; Mrs Faversham.'

'Good afternoon, Mrs Faversham.'

'Aren't you tall for your age, dear . . .'

Julia said: 'And what have you got to say to us?'

Imogen thought. She told them that they had had botany today, and had drawn the inside of a daffodil. That Louise had fallen down the steps and grazed her knee. That Miss Fairlie's cat was going to have kittens, and Amanda was going to have one.

That she did not tell them about Felix did not trouble her. She had never had a secret with another person before, except little ones with people at Miss Fairlie's, and the whole astonishment of Felix made him unreal in this immediate setting.

At the same time, she was so inexperienced in guile that on the slightest encouragement she would have burst out with: Oh Mummy, it's a terrific secret, but Felix came up to my kitchen and I cooked him some real grub and he ate it!

It was a toss-up. Julia, liking Imogen to express herself, did not probe with questions. Besides, who could possibly suspect Imogen of hiding anything? She was all too transparent.

And, in any case, Julia was involved in a very tricky discussion with these two members of the hospital board. So when Imogen had finished her recital she said:

'Thank you, darling. Would you like some orange juice?' Tea time was past, and they were drinking sherry.

'No, thank you very much, I must go and wash up my cooking things.'

Off she went, closing the door quietly. 'What a happy young creature,' commented Mrs Faversham when she had gone.

* * *

'Two things,' said Julia, 'two of the *tragedies* of my

life, I think I shall never quite get over... in quite different ways...’ She looked up from the desk set slantwise across the corner of what she called her ‘workroom’. Architecturally it was a dressing-room, adjoining her bedroom; but she had decided ‘study’ was too pompous and ‘boudoir’ certainly too feminine; however, she avoided formality, with frilled net curtains and a primrose-covered chaise-longue on which Althea, her sister-in-law, was reclining.

One of the tragedies, anyone who knew Julia well could guess: Her little boy Robin, born two years after Imogen, had died at eight weeks. The other Althea waited to be informed of.

‘... And one of them was the sale of Bolvers,’ Julia said.

‘Really?’

‘I loved that house, just in itself.’

‘Yes. It was lovely.’

‘Everybody thought so. I kept it on till it was quite obvious we weren’t going to make use of it... But lately, I don’t know why, I keep remembering it again. I have a feeling that if only we were going there, this Easter, instead of to Curton... I don’t know. Perhaps I’m being sentimental. It’s a relief to be able to tell someone...’ There aren’t many people I can talk to really frankly...’ She folded her arms on the desk and let her head droop. Althea turned a little more in Julia’s direction to indicate sympathetic attention.

‘Don’t you like Curton? I think that’s a rather lovely house, too.’

‘Oh, it is. Specially after the improvements I’ve made. Though the style is so different... I never did care much for those Victorian boxes... No, it’s something about the countryside down there, I think. It always seems rather flat and stuffy to me. You know how much energy I have—and *have* to have—but at Curton I seem to need twice as much.’

‘Yes...?’

'Well, I mustn't mope,' said Julia, briskly raising her head. 'Nobody ever hears me complain. I know we must have a place in Peter's constituency, so that's that. But as a matter of fact, I don't know that it entirely suits him, you know. Somewhere more bracing would be better for him. Specially just now. I don't know what it is about him, but he's . . . not himself.'

'Oh? What's the matter with him?'

'Nothing's the matter,' said Julia quickly. 'That's not what I'm saying at all. He's ready for a break . . . And at Curton, he's so much bothered by everybody's piffling problems, and has to go round opening swimming baths, and all that sort of nonsense . . . Yet, at the same time, when he's down there he sinks . . . D'you know what I mean? He turns into a pottering country squire and seems quite happy like that. It's not stimulating enough for him.'

'Still, it's a kind of rest.'

'There's rest *and* rest. I always find a change of occupation and fresh interests far more restful than vegetating. But then I've got a more lively temperament than Peter's altogether. If it weren't for me, sometimes I think he would settle back into middle age . . .' She laughed. Althea said: 'Yes, you do prod him faithfully. But after all, Julia, he *is* middle-aged—'

'I certainly don't "prod" Peter. What a ridiculous word. You don't really understand, do you, Althea? Of course, for you, it's different. Jack's such a live wire. Jonathan was always the stodgy one of the family. Jack's more like me.'

'In a way . . .' admitted Althea.

'Middle age doesn't begin till sixty, nowadays. Unless one's a decrepit weedy type like Andrew Flend. Peter has always taken care of his health—he still goes to the gymnasium, you know. And at least he takes exercise when he's at Curton. When I can get him out of the car. Of course it *is* rather dull countryside for walking, and he won't ride. It would be nice if he would; it would

encourage Imogen. She loves everything about her pony except getting *on* it, and if she's nervous I'm not going to force her at all. All the other children round there are pony-mad, that's the only thing. Still, they like her. I don't know who wouldn't, do you?'

'Oh, no; she's such a sweet thing.'

'Country children are so much simpler. I don't mind what friends she makes down there. In town it's a bit different, but at least one can be sure that only the right type of child goes to Miss Fairlie's. Not that I altogether care for that Michelette Franck. She's rather too poised for her age. A charming creature, you know, but one does distrust charm, at any age... I usually try to keep her and Imogen under my eye when she comes here. I have to be careful, in a discreet way, about Imogen's friends, just because she *is* so sweet natured. She's so pliable.'

'Yes, Imogen would give way to anybody.'

'Oh, not *anybody*. She's got a will of her own, in her quiet way. She's not a doormat. And I must say, she has resources. She's quite happy amusing herself. She isn't one of those children who have to have attention all the time. Since Jeanne-Marie went home, she's kept herself busy with her own ploys. I've never yet had Imogen hanging round as so many children do, you know, wailing: "What shall I do *now* . . . ?"'

'Oh, yes. Mine do that endlessly.'

'You ought to encourage them to develop their own interests,' Julia told her. 'Stephen's musical, isn't he? Why not give him a recorder or a simple instrument he can learn?'

'He's got a guitar. But he gets fed up with that.'

'No application,' said Julia crisply. 'Of course, he's only eleven, isn't he. But surely Elizabeth has pursuits of her own? At seventeen?'

'Yes, but it's such a broody age. Half the time she's madly enthusiastic about something or other, but as soon

as it goes wrong she doesn't know what to do with herself.'

'I don't think Imogen will be like that as an adolescent, somehow. Which reminds me; I must try to get hold of my pet adolescent soon. He's elusive these days. I suppose he's being tactful, keeping out of our way, which shows better manners than I'd have expected in him. And he must be busy, with his work for Balkan on top of his college course.'

'Oh, yes; that's Felix, you mean?'

'*He* has application. But then, he's brilliant. It was so lucky I happened to think of Balkan, because I could see he was a man Felix really admired. It will make all the difference in the world to Felix's development as an artist.'

'It's bound to. It was decent of you to do so much for him.'

'Well, there's nothing so unusual in that. Felix isn't the first young person I've helped. Look at Sylvia Roth; she's a *coryphée* now. All because I saw her dancing on the garage roof when she was eight... And the Smith girl, and Janet Hammond—she got a scholarship to Newnham, you remember, in the end. Anyway, that's beside the point. One doesn't do these things for gratitude.'

'Isn't Felix grateful?'

'It isn't Felix,' said Julia. Her eyebrows twitched; she did not easily frown. She opened a drawer of her desk and took out a yellow file. '—What we *were* talking about, my dear, was that dinner party for the state visit—I can't think how we got on to all this...' She made no effort, however, to get off it again, but opened the file and found a letter. 'I had to write to Julian, of course, and tell him what I'd arranged for Felix—'

'Oh, yes; Julian,' said Althea alertly. 'How did he take it?'

'Well, I can't see that it was up to Julian to take it or not. It was all fixed by then, and even he could hardly object. It was so obviously a wonderful thing for Felix...'

'But Julian wasn't pleased?'

'He couldn't say not, point blank. In fact Julian never did say anything point blank. You don't remember him, do you?'

'Oh, yes. Vaguely.'

'It would have to be. He *was* vague. But I always thought he was fundamentally good natured. I can't quite size up this letter. I might say, it isn't even from Julian. He gets Olwen to write for him, full of "Julian says", and that never does ring true, does it?'

'Well, perhaps he's being delicate.'

'Why on earth?'

'After all, he *was* your husband.' As she said this, it struck Althea that one could not have phrased it: You were his wife.

'But my dear, that was so long ago. And it's Felix's career we have to think about now, not our own personal lives. Well anyway; Olwen says: "*It is very kind of you to take such an interest in Felix.*" Not too rapturous, is she? And then: "*Julian says it is far too kind because he is doubtful if we can ever repay you.*" As if I'd given any hint of that! But then, listen to this: "*Julian hopes you won't let Felix take advantage of you at all*"—I'd like to see anyone of his age do that!—"*because he is rather a selfish boy and doesn't always appreciate what is done for him. He hopes he is worth all this trouble.*" Good heavens, if Balkan accepts him as a pupil, isn't that self-evident? Don't you see, the whole tone is rather . . . small-minded?'

'Well they might feel they were under a big obligation—'

'That's nonsense. I said nothing in my letter that could possibly make them feel that. I rather took the line that it was a privilege for *me* to be able to help such a gifted boy, and so on . . . This next bit is, I think, pure Olwen. Maternal. "*I am very glad he came to see you, because he doesn't make friends easily and he is young to be all on his own in London.*" So he is; sixteen; a schoolboy, really. I wonder who found him those squalid digs, to start with. They're quite unsuitable. Though, for all I

know, they're no more squalid than his own home. One forgets the difference of background. If there were any thing I could do for Felix in *that* direction I should be only too grateful.'

'They're bound to worry,' said Althea. 'He *is* young. Maybe they're afraid of people influencing him, you know. Giving him big ideas.'

'His ideas are big enough, I'm sure. And he'd be hard to influence. But, really, if they're afraid I'll be interfering, why did they send him away from home at all, at that age? They ought to be glad it was I who took him up, and not somebody less sympathetic and practical.'

'Yes, they ought. It's been a real break for him. And you do these things so thoroughly. You aren't the kind of person who takes someone up for a while and then drops them again.'

'That would be unkind than not helping at all... It's funny you should say that, because the next thing she writes is a bit more of Julian: "*Julian thinks Felix needs to work steadily and stick to his course at the College so it is just as well Moshe Balkan is going abroad again and the lessons won't last too long.*" Althea, can you beat *that* for sheer mouldiness? It has been half in my mind to send Felix with Balkan, when he goes back to California—he lives there for most of the time, you know, and kind of commutes to Tel Aviv—it's amazing how much time celebrities spend in jets these days, isn't it—But, anyhow. I'll see how Felix does get on with Balkan in the course of the next month or two. And Balkan with Felix, I needn't say. But one thing I *won't* have is Felix's family standing in the way of his career. It simply wouldn't be fair—to Felix or to the musical world... Do you know, I hate to be critical, or suspect anybody of pettiness, but doesn't it occur to you that Julian might just be jealous?'

'Of...?'

'Of Felix, of course. Felix is a thousand times more gifted than Julian ever was, but Julian may well have

a feeling that if anybody had really taken him in hand at Felix's age, and given him this kind of advantage, it would have been the making of him.'

* * *

Julia's interpretation of Olwen's letter had been accurate, up to a point.

'I'm not writing to that bitch,' Julian said. He said it without heat; troubles grieved rather than angered him; when things were too much, his voice took on a whining note.

Olwen sat with her writing pad on her knee after supper. Fen was playing her guitar in the kitchen. Flick was cutting out a frock on the table. Julian was a grey-blond fuzz and a pair of legs at each end of the local paper. The draught from the cottage door stirred the ash on the brick hearth. 'I'm writing to Julia,' Olwen announced. 'I mean, we'll have to, won't we.'

'Go ahead,' from behind the newspaper.

Olwen sighed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. 'I'll have to thank her...'

'Do that.'

Fen had let the dog in. He came barging past the table and flopped muddily at Olwen's feet. 'Damn him, he trod on my material!' Flick screamed, snatching a piece from the floor.

You'd have thought, with someone the size of Felix gone out of it, there would be more space and peace in the cottage. But no. 'Say what you like,' Olwen murmured, 'it was kind of her.'

'Well, if that's what *you* like, say it.'

The wonder of it was, that Felix had gone to see Julia at all. He had still been at home on his Christmas vacation when her letter came. He'd said: 'Go and see her? What for?'

And Olwen had not been able to explain, exactly. She had not been able to explain to Julian why she had mentioned on Julia's Christmas card that Felix was in London.

To Olwen, it had been so obvious: Julia had always taken an interest in the kids. She was rich. She might be able to do something for Felix. But Olwen suspected this idea was not only obvious but sort of vulgar. So she hadn't been able to justify it to Julian.

Julian had said: 'No, for heaven's sake don't go and see her. She might take an interest in you.'

Well, thought Olwen, if only somebody in London would . . . She knew Felix loathed it at the College, which was a pity, after he'd put in all that furious work to get there.

Julian said, on the other hand, that having got himself there, Felix could jolly well see it through.

'What else shall I say?' asked Olwen, sucking her pen.

'Tell her, since these lessons were all her idea, we're ruddy well not paying her back for them.'

'I can't put it quite like that.'

'I don't see why you need write at all. Felix has done all this without even consulting us, so it's up to him to do the thanking. And I can see him doing it, too. *Fen*, shut that door—' The ash was whirling.

'It blew *itself* open.' It slammed.

'—Tell Julia what a bounder our dear Felix can be. She'd better lock up her jewellery when he's in the house.'

'Oh, Ju, that's beastly. When did he *ever* . . .'

'What about the typewriter?'

'But he explained that. He needed the money so badly to go to that Barenboim concert. It was *important* to him.'

'No wonder he's ruined, with a mother like you.'

'Shut up,' said Flick with pins in her mouth. 'You're a sod to Felix yourself.'

'That's enough from you, madam.'

'Be quiet, Flick,' added Olwen mournfully.

'I admit,' said Flick bending over her work, 'that Felix is a sod too. I wish her joy of him—What are we supposed to call her? Auntie?'

'You won't have to call her anything,' said Julian peevishly.

'Well when I go to London, and call on Felix at her palatial house—'

'Felix won't be at her house,' said Julian with faint alarm.

'He'll have to wash his face if he is. I thought she was patronizing him?'

Olwen finished her sentence. 'Anyway, if he does see Julia, at least she'll see he's fed. It won't do him any harm to be looked after a bit. He's awfully young really.' She began to write again. 'And those digs, I didn't think they were much, though they were about all he could manage on his grant.'

'He's lucky to *have* a grant,' said Julian. 'We didn't have it so cushy in my day.'

'Well, if he hadn't, we couldn't afford any of this at all.'

'Might be just as well. He'll be chucking the whole thing again at any moment.'

That was just it. A disappointing son, Julian could have loved. A successful son, he would have admired. But Felix vacillated perversely between the two; from Julian's point of view it often seemed that Felix's devotion to music was simply a weapon against his father.

'Oh, no he won't,' said Olwen. 'Not with Julia helping him.'

'I can't think of a worse fate for him.'

'Then you ought to be pleased,' said Flick.

'Oh, shut up.'

'One thing,' said Olwen, 'he won't easily get spoilt. Even if Julia does make a fuss of him.'

'What the hell does that imply?'

Both women gaped at him.

They had not known, though, what it was like, at Bolvers. They had not seen him in his bow tie. Julian's very soul seemed to blush at that memory.

'Well,' said Olwen, 'I mean, he's quite a strong character.'

'Not like his father, I suppose you mean.'

'Ju, I didn't mean anything of the *sort*. Why are you so cross?'

'Oh, never mind. Hurry up with that writing pad. I think I'd better write to Felix and make it quite clear what my opinion is. I shall tell him categorically to keep away from rich women and the salons of musical London and get on with some hard work, and that if he gets slung out of the College he needn't appeal to us for support. And you can tell Julia, by the way, that he can have these lessons from Balkan now he's started them, but—in May, did she say?—the whole thing can bloody well be dropped. And let that be the end of her interference. *And* yours. If you hadn't told Julia he was in town, none of this would have happened.'

'Well,' said Olwen, 'I only meant it for the best.'

* * *

Julia listened critically outside the drawing-room door. It was impossible to say whether his technique had improved in three or four weeks, of course, but in any case Felix was working. Those scales in double thirds were bothering him and he kept at them, each time with a little more attack. He was hard at it.

She waited for a pause before she went in. 'Hello. Swann says you ask whether I'm out—I begin to feel you're avoiding me. There's no need to be as tactful as that.'

Felix turned a preoccupied face. 'Hello,' he said stonily.

'Swann also says you've been here all morning—has the College vacation begun already?'

'More or less.'

'I'm sorry I've seen so little of you lately. I've been having one of my worst whirls. Don't let me interrupt you, but we go down to the country the day after tomorrow and I wanted to see you before that.'

'How long for?'

'It depends. A few weeks, perhaps. Though we do up again for odd functions, for a night or so. What about you?'

'Me?'

'The point being, that if you want to carry on with Balkan, you won't be able to go home? Unless you do up every week. How long does it take, from Wolverhampton?'

Felix thought, kneading his knuckles. He looked filthy, and rather puffy in the face. Julia perched on the back of the couch, studying him. 'Are you working too hard? Is this being a bit much?'

'I'd rather not go home. Can I still use this piano when you're away?'

'Certainly. Even more so, in fact. Not that it's bothered us so far. Peter hasn't complained. He's down at Curton already, actually. He had to go to some meetings—Do tell me, how are you getting on? I should have kept an eye on you. Are you feeding yourself well?'

'I'm okay.'

'You don't look it, terribly. In fact your mother might think you were going the pace, if she saw you now. I feel a bit responsible . . .'

Felix did not disclaim. He was pleased with the effect his appearance seemed to have had. It might be cashed in on. He looked Julia in the eye and said: 'Maybe I'm tired, you know. I *could* be.'

'I'm sure you could, and are.'

'Tell you what, I couldn't doss here, could I, while you're away? They needn't bother about me. But if you're not shutting up the house . . . I could look after myself.'

'I don't see why not. That would be quite a good idea. I don't think much of those awful digs anyway.'

'You see,' improvised Felix, 'Mrs Riley has people staying for Easter and will want to throw me out for a bit.'

'Then that's settled. I'll tell Swann. You can have your meals in the housekeeper's room, you remember?'

'Oh, I can eat out. I don't want to be a nuisance,' said Felix, nearly overdoing it. She gave him a curious look.

'You need feeding up. You sound rather dispirited altogether. I almost feel I've been neglecting you.'

'Not a bit,' said Felix bravely.

'I'll write to Olwen and explain I've asked you to stay here so that you—'

'No, don't do that, for God's sake. I mean—I'll write to her.'

'All right. Well, get on with your practising. I'll see you again before I go, I hope. And, if you're staying here, for heaven's sake tell Hewett to get your clothes washed and mended. She'll be here till Thursday, and then she goes on holiday. I don't need her at Curton. By the time I come back I hope I'll find you looking a bit more lively.'

'Yes,' said Felix. He looked her in the eye and added: 'Thanks.'

5

Under such a blue sky even the town of Swenbury had a cheerful and dawdling air. The light was brilliant enough to delude one that the brewery, the council estates and the Town Hall were in different shades of grey. At Saturday midday the shopping centre quietened for an interval; the pavements were clear enough for the motorist to glimpse cotton frocks dancing at gay angles in shop windows. Red buses, suddenly gleaming, swung off willingly towards the suburbs and country. At the station entrance a waiting taxi-driver had wound down his window and his face was crimson with sun.

The London train was due. Peter bought a platform ticket. Inside the station winter lingered; the grimy canopies allowed no sun on the gritty slot machines and crates of what smelt like fish, though they were labelled: "Thos Wilson & Sons, Hydraulic Engineers, Battenham, Handle With Care". Peter examined the topmost crate with a spreading dissatisfaction. A chilly wind crept along the rails. Was the station atmosphere enough to prevent the population from travelling by train, or was it like this because the population no longer travelled by train? In either case he saw no remedy. Here—six minutes after the train should have arrived—the ticket collector and a porter drooped, resigned, in idle chat, distant in the gloomy wastes; and meanwhile uncounted acres of farmland and scenery were being ruined as the motorways spread themselves over the country. If he mentioned this to the two men by the station barrier one or other of them would be sure to remark: Oh well, that's progress. Thousands of people crammed their cars into quiet seaside bays or lonely Lakeland valleys, demanding peace and solitude. It was all an absurdity.

Peter found that he was looking at himself in the dusty

glass of the Refreshment Room window. Irritated, he moved away. The Refreshment Room was closed, of course. Why? Had he, indeed, ever seen it open?

But the rails and air began to jitter with the approach of the diesel engine. The train crawled round the slight bend beyond the wagon works; it shuddered alongside the platform and reluctantly stopped. Passengers turned travel-doped faces to see where they were, showed a glimmer of relief that they need not get off here. Only one door, of a first-class carriage, opened; Julia hopped out, looking, as usual, as if she had travelled nowhere at all. She was dressed in pale blue. Imogen, loping out after her, wore a scarlet trouser suit. It was as if a barrow of fresh flowers had been wheeled on to the platform. Passengers turned their faces again, their eyes coming to life. Peter going to take their suitcases was followed unbidden by the porter.

'Ten minutes late,' Peter remarked, but he no longer minded.

'How was your meeting?'

'Dreary.' They laughed. Outside the station they stepped into sunlight. 'D'you want to sit in front with Daddy, darling?'

'Yes, please.'

'She's a tiny bit green,' Julia explained. 'Mostly because it's past her lunch time.' She flicked off her hat and turned at once from townswoman to countrywoman. The car nosed out of the station approach and followed a bus towards the main square. There were daffodils in a municipal bed. At the traffic lights Peter studied Imogen, whose cheek was indeed pale. 'Didn't they give you anything to eat on the train?'

'Train food's nasty,' said Imogen. She was reading a magazine, sprawling. 'Is Tomahawk okay?'

'Waiting for you with a garland round his neck.'

'What else have you been doing?' Julia asked him. He moved his head to meet her eyes in the driving mirror.

'Colonel Rudd threatened to call, but hasn't yet. This

afternoon I've got to plod about five weary miles to look at the proposed route for the motorway. Apparently they're still fighting about it.'

'Can I come?' asked Imogen.

'You'd be bored.'

'No I wouldn't,' she said gently. She was probably right. Peter had been proud of the quickness and brightness of Pam and Sally when they were young; Imogen's mysterious stupidity he loved.

They gained speed through suburbs, past red brick villas. Julia had closed her eyes. 'Tired?' asked Peter, noticing.

'No... Margaret gave me some letters for you. Oh, and the Bennets have cancelled for the eleventh. They are demons. Now we shall have to fit them in again—perhaps with the Wilbrahams?'

'We'll see,' said Peter, comfortably remote from London's social jigsaw. Thorn hedges pricked with green flowed by. 'What else have *you* been doing?'

'Fittings, and hair-dresser... Oh, I've left Felix ensconced in the house.'

'Felix...? Oh; Felix. Why?'

'To practise. And he was looking shagged. I don't think he eats enough.'

'He looks fairly tubby.'

'That's just his build. And he's working too hard.'

'Felix is always hungry,' observed Imogen. 'Daddy, what does fri-vol-ous mean?'

'When do *you* see Felix?' Julia asked.

'Oh, sometimes.'

'Tell me the sentence,' said Peter.

'"This is a fri-vol-ous beach dress in candy-striped cotton..."'

He explained.

'Oh. You can send for the pattern, you see, if you send some money, and then you can make it yourself.'

'Would you like to?'

Imogen thought about it, her hair sifting to the glossy

page. The car turned off the main road and wound towards Curton village. Elms meeting overhead were bare; beyond them rooks wheeled in an emptier sky over the water meadows. 'Look,' said Julia, 'the willow's out.' The tree dipped its naiad tresses into the pond on the green.

'I think it might be a bit difficult,' decided Imogen. She closed her magazine. 'Oh, look, Mummy, the tree's got its leaves nearly on!'

'Darling,' said Julia. She waved to a lady in tweed who was coming through the lych gate. With delighted recognition the lady waved back. Peter told Imogen: 'Our crocuses are still lovely. You'll see.'

They clustered in bursting stars along the verge of the short drive leading to Curton Grange, saffron and purple glorying in the sun. The house watched the car's approach with its square stucco face still in shade. At the steps a Landrover was parked. 'Oh God,' said Peter. 'Old Blimp.'

Colonel Rudd, peering from the window of the drawing-room, moved back to allow the Culfaxes a decently private arrival.

'No, it isn't,' said Imogen. 'It's Colonel Rudd. I saw him at the window.'

'What a time to call,' said Julia opening her door. 'Darling, run straight through to the kitchen and get Mrs Stewart to give you something there.'

'Oh, but I want to know how Can-can is . . .'

'I'll ask him for you. Off you go.'

Obedient, Imogen climbed the steps of the open front door, meeting the dogs who came hurtling down the hall. They paused to be patted and hurtled on, greedy to be patted again by Julia, who dropped to her knees on the gravel.

'Darlings . . . darlings . . .' she said; they rolled on their backs. 'Oh, Peter, we *must* have them in town . . .'

'But you know . . .' he began sadly, pulling suitcases from the boot.

'Yes, I do know; it never works,' said Julia cheerfully submissive. She stood up. The dogs, a golden Labrador

and a cairn, rushed on to be patted by Peter, as if they had not parted from him a couple of hours ago. He followed Julia indoors. He hoped old Rudd wasn't hoping to stay to lunch.

Julia did these unexpected honours much better than Peter did. She sailed into the drawing-room with both hands outstretched: 'Imogen is dying to know how Cangan is?'

And Colonel Rudd's voice: 'Oh, she's mending. The vet said it was only a strained tendon. And Jennifer's arm is better, too.'

'Well, of course, Imogen wasn't a bit concerned for Jennifer. Only about the pony . . .' They laughed together. Peter went straight upstairs with the suitcases. That was the way to deal with the old brute: Get him on the hop, omit apologies and greetings. Peter would have felt obliged to say *Hullo, sorry we were out, blah-blah*.

Balmy breeze met him as he opened the door of Imogen's room; the curtains floated. He looked at himself in the mirror beyond the bed as he dumped her suitcase. His image was still there.

Lately he had watched himself watching himself in mirrors, and was rather worried about it.

Down in the drawing-room Colonel Rudd stood with his back to the fireplace and Julia, giving him her keenest attention, was perched on the arm of a chair. They were drinking sherry.

'Sorry to drop in at an awkward time,' said Colonel Rudd. 'But your woman said you'd be back soon, and it was just for a moment . . .'

'Your woman.' What a way to refer to Mrs Stewart. Peter had been brought up to treat servants courteously. He liked to think he represented all his constituents, the county types as well as semi-industrial Swenbury, but, of the two, he found the county types the more trying.

When one man stands with his back to the fireplace, it is difficult for another man to know where to put himself. Peter was not going to sit, as it were, at the feet of

Rudd; and, perched like Julia, he would over-emphasize the supposedly brief nature of the Colonel's call. He poured himself some sherry and took it to the window, where he gazed out at the crocuses.

'... Fact of the matter is,' Rudd was trumpeting, 'these County Council idiots want a kick up the backside...'

Julia, bless her, laughed. Peter sipped his sherry.

He had a slight headache. He, like Imogen, was hungry. Nowadays his appetite came and went; and always at the wrong times. He was collecting symptoms, till there might be enough to take to the doctor. Nothing much; just odd things.

Thank heaven Julia had come. These last two days without her here had been surprisingly sticky, in spite of the splendid weather, in spite of the fact that he had so much looked forward to getting down to Curton.

He must do his bit with Rudd. Absently, he was listening to the conversation. Rather absently he put in: '—But there isn't an inch of National Trust property anywhere on the route of the proposed road...'

Rudd would probably go home and announce importantly that he'd been 'lobbying' Peter about all this. It would be nice if there *were* a lobby at Curton Grange. One was so much in the thick of it... Yet, in a way, it was the remoteness of parliamentary politics from real life that had made Peter fed up with them lately...

He considered that. Fed up? Well, everybody got a bit fed up at times, in any job.

He told Rudd, who was talking about 'hole-and-corner stuff': 'The plans were reproduced in the local Press last October, and they've been on view in the County Surveyor's office...'

That had sounded rather upstage, Peter decided. He turned back from the window and offered the colonel more sherry.

'No, thanks all the same, better push off. As long as I've made my point...' He made it all over again. Julia's eyes became just a little glazed.

'But he isn't even a member of this self-constituted Residents' Association, is he?' she wailed when he had finally gone.

'His importance, I'm afraid, is that he has a good many friends in the local squirearchy, not all of them necessarily opposed to the road scheme—'

'A man with a face like that *can't* have friends. Come on, let's eat.'

'You were splendid with him.'

'I wasn't listening to a word the old goat said. You were the one who was doing that, evidently.' She darted out of the room and was heard calling: '... Mrs Stewart dear ... Yes, hasn't it been ages ... And how *are* you? ... Oh, yes, whenever you're ready, *we* are ... Salad would be wonderful ...'

We make a good team, Peter thought. At least, Julia makes it.

Two hours later he stood in the middle of a domed thirty-acre field and looked over the slowly falling countryside towards the river and the twinkling chimneys of the town and wondered: What am I doing here?

On this slight upland the wind stirred his hair. The County Surveyor wore a deerstalker and had a pipe in his mouth. Mr Grace of the Residents' Association sat on a shooting stick. Bob Phelps, whose land most of this was, was glum with hands in pockets. In the distance Imogen's scarlet legs flickered along the hedge; she wore gumboots and an anorak and was looking for something; birds' nests?

'From *there* to *there*,' explained the County Surveyor, pointing, 'is all marsh land. See what I mean? Too expensive. Now *we* wanted to bring it this side of the railway ... Good viewpoint, this; you can see just about the whole layout ... From *there*, you see? Now ...' He opened out his map, which fluttered, dazzling. Peter looked over his shoulder. 'Good of you,' added the surveyor, 'to tramp over all this with us.'

Peter said to Phelps: 'It'll be tramped over a good

many more times, from the look of it, before anything is fixed.'

Phelps nodded, and gazed aside at his ewes with their porcelain-white lambs on the western slope.

'Oh, no; we're getting on,' said the surveyor.

Imogen, heading this way, had paused to admire the lambs. It had been her own idea not to bring the dogs with them: '... There might be sheep and things...' She was thoughtful, in spite of not being clever. She was excellently behaved on an outing like this, never straying out of sight but never hanging around or eavesdropping. She was quite evidently, as she had promised, not bored. She had something in her hands; flowers? Peter brought his attention back to the map.

'Yes; I see.' He didn't know what the surveyor had been pointing out.

'It'll ruin the landscape wherever they put the damn thing,' exploded Grace.

'Well; that's progress,' murmured the surveyor.

Peter felt an urgent desire for something to lean on. They had another couple of miles to go, before they all piled into Grace's car and drove back to the starting point where they had left the others. He thought: No one here cares a button what I say, now or later. I'm just 'the M.P.', showing willing. Why did I let myself in for this? The unfamiliar viewpoint disorientated him; the fields, unsuspecting of their violation, were too calm.

'You've got to have progress,' Phelps agreed with admirable impartiality.

Peter would have liked to say: Why?—Except that they would have answered him; he did not want an answer.

He had not, though he did not understand why, wanted an answer when he consulted Andrew about that old Mwalalaland question. The fiasco of that interview had been at the back of his mind for weeks but only now, in the middle of nowhere with these bores, did he dimly see that what he had wanted was a non-answer—a question opened and left open, so that he could make his own

decision, and prove to himself his unfitness for the African relations office. It had had to be, not a rejection, but a renunciation. He had wanted only Andrew, who understood but who didn't count, to witness it.

So he knew that he wasn't going to accept the job if it was offered to him. Because...? Because he didn't want it.

That was, simply, it; far too simply for Peter, committed to a life of public service, in which the value of the work determined one's attitude, and certainly not the other way about. 'I want' and 'I don't want' and 'I feel' had no place in his conditioned thinking. What had taken so long to struggle through to consciousness was weak through long disuse, but somehow undeniable; 'I don't feel like' taking that job.

And then, even so, the feeling was negative. He wasn't unemotional in his dealings with life; emotion had a place, he had always admitted. But this was different. It was on a level with his desire to lean, or preferably lie down, in this limbo of a damp green field.

'Yes, indeed,' he said as the surveyor paused. 'That's a point to be considered.' He hoped it was. They seemed satisfied with his contribution.

They began to move, Grace folding his shooting stick. They plodded down the slope and joined a muddy lane. Imogen was at his elbow. 'Look Daddy...' she fluted, showing him a bunch of violets. He put his arm round her shoulders. The lane crossed a little brook by a footbridge; everybody looked kindly round at Imogen to usher her across but she, not noticing them, her eyes on her violets, walked straight through the water in her gumboots. The men, friends for that moment, laughed. A moorhen scuttered from one clump of rushes to another. 'The Ministry of Transport had this on priority as far back as seven years ago,' resumed the surveyor as they plodded on up the lane. 'But then they...'

I must be not too well, Peter told himself. Even this slight gradient makes me breathless... He could see now

that, ever since his attack of 'flu in the winter, this sense of . . . reluctance had been growing in him; and he could see now that Julia had known it. She was more acute than he, even about himself. She would help him to see that the feeling did not get out of hand.

Yet the feeling said: Why?

'The south embankment,' intoned the surveyor over his map, 'will be about level with those poplars—'

'Would be,' corrected Grace swinging his stick.

'On the plans it said the westbound carriageway would go clean through Harrisons' yard,' Phelps told Peter.

'No, that's wrong,' said the surveyor. 'We're not taking any buildings down on this stretch . . . What's the name of the farm?'

'I dunno. Harrison's,' said Phelps shrugging.

'It must have a *name* . . .' fretted the surveyor, flapping the map. The others waited. Imogen was ahead, sitting on a gate.

Why? said Peter's reluctance. He ignored it, and leant on a tree trunk. This was no time to be going into fundamentals. He had in any case been going into them too much lately—about that African matter, for instance. He'd devoted a lot of thought to that. And it had got him nowhere.

No, said his treacherous new inner voice; because you were creating a situation, trying to get away from the fact that you were nowhere in any case. That you don't exist. Except in mirrors.

Peter sighed aloud, and moved round the tree trunk through a gap in the hedge so that he could look back at the brook and feel the sun on his face. Indeed, who *was* anywhere? One couldn't analyse too much; it was destructive. Soothed by the sun he smiled a little at himself. Among the roots of the tree he noticed a small clump of primrose; he wondered if Imogen had found any yet. He bent to pick a couple for her.

Perhaps *he* was not wholly at fault; circumstances were seldom perfect either. And they changed. Politics now-

adays were not what they had been even at the beginning of Peter's career. One had to specialize. It was Peter's misfortune to look like an old-style grousemoor Tory; whatever his tenets he would be typecast as that by the electorate. He had been aware enough of this constriction. Nowadays, unless you had slogged your way up through the trade-unions or were an economics expert, there was no place for you in government. You were otherwise acceptable only as a television personality; and this, Peter acceptably was; he had quite enjoyed his television appearances, and had let that distract him from the recognition that there was no point to them.

Power; if that was what he had sought, it had failed him. *It* did not exist any more, as he had supposed it. By it, he had never meant authority, but simply the privilege of thinking for the ignorant. However, nowadays thinking was not needed. One computed or one entertained... There were celandine along this sheltered hedge, and a wispy white flower whose name he had forgotten; but he could see no more primroses...

‘Daddy...?’

‘Hello?’ He turned, guiltily, to see Imogen running down the field from her gate, but the lane behind him empty.

‘What are you picking?’

‘Well, er... Where have those chaps got to?’

‘They’re standing up there, on the other side of those ricks... Oh, primroses!’

‘They’re for you... Are they waiting for me? I didn’t mean to wander off like this—it was incredibly rude of me—’

‘Oh, I expect they thought you’d gone to spend a penny,’ said Imogen comfortingly. And, thought Peter comforted, no doubt she was right. She was an angel.

* * *

‘I can’t think why I imagine’, said Julia on Easter

Sunday, 'that we have a *quiet* life when we come down to Curton.'

She was walking home from matins with her step-daughter Pam. It had taken them some while to extricate themselves from the chatting crowd outside the church; Peter and Anthony were still detained there. The other resident guests, the Raynors, had not come to church, nor had Pam's little boys and their nanny. Imogen had rushed ahead with the Rudd child, taking her to the stables to see Tomahawk. Overhead in the calm grey air, calm grey pigeons roo-rooed among the branches. Pam said: 'Well, you did invite us.'

'My *dear*, I didn't mean you. It's being a lovely weekend. But I don't blame Diana and Clive for staying away from that service . . . All those women in new hats, staring at each other. And do you know, there were exactly seven of us at the eight o'clock communion this morning.'

'Anthony and I thought of going; but we overslept.'

'I shouldn't allow myself to, on Easter day. But then my faith does mean a lot to me. I honestly don't know how I'd face all the trials and enterprises of life if I weren't sure there was a higher power to appeal to.'

Pam thought, without irony, because she was a naïve young woman: Yes, I bet she gets God to do things for her, too.

'If we only ask, so much is given us,' said Julia. 'At least, that's been my experience. I meant to ask you, by the way: How do you think Daddy is?'

'Daddy?' repeated Pam, surprised. 'All right. Just as usual.'

'But of course, you haven't seen much of him. With the point-to-point yesterday and so on—'

'I never do see an awful lot of him when I come, by himself, if that's what you mean. Why? Isn't he well?'

'Physically, yes. Oh yes. It's just that I've felt a difference in him lately.'

'How?'

'It's nothing very much, I'm sure. I'm worrying about

nothing. But it's his attitude . . . I can't get him to put it into words.'

'I expect he hasn't got any words, then,' said Peter's first-born, turning a feminine version of Peter's rather formally handsome face towards her stepmother. Julia thought: They are unresponsive at times, all these Culfax creatures . . . 'Daddy doesn't much talk about his own feelings, does he? And he doesn't much like being asked. But he'd soon tell you if it was anything important.'

'My dear Pam, I think I understand him quite as well as you do, after all this time.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I think he was just rather tired, you know, after that long winter. I'm not being indiscreet enough to discuss him behind his back, but I did wonder if you'd noticed anything in him . . . Of course, I'm more sensitive to his hidden feelings than you can be; naturally.'

The dogs hurtled down the drive to meet them. 'Well, he seems all right to me,' said Pam, genially pounding the Labrador's head with her prayer book. Little Jeremy waddled up after the dogs and his mother did the same to him. Julia went upstairs and Pam into the drawing-room where Diana Raynor lay on a couch with *The Observer*.

'Had a good church?' she asked over it.

'Yes, thanks. Quite a crowd. Julia doesn't blame you for not coming.'

'I'm relieved. It might have been worth it just to watch Julia not talking for almost an hour.'

They laughed. Pam pulled off her hat and said: 'Still, one can't resist her, somehow.'

'Somehow one doesn't, often.'

'She seems to think God is on her side, doesn't she.'

'I dare say she's right.'

'Who, Mummy? Who?' clamoured Jeremy.

'Little pitcher,' said Pam, putting her hat on his head.

Upstairs, Julia changed from her suit into a white corduroy dress and was hunting for her silver chain necklace

when Peter came in. At Curton they shared a room if they had many guests. Peter glanced at himself in the long mirror, blinked, straightened his tie and said: 'The vicar, Mrs *and* sister-in-law are coming to tea between the christenings and evensong. Sorry about that.'

'No, it'll work them off. Do we let Imogen ride with Jennifer Rudd tomorrow afternoon?'

'Yes, if Jim goes with them? I don't trust that Jennifer not to lead over a four-foot hedge.'

'Imogen would have more sense... I meant, what were you planning to do tomorrow? Anything with Imogen?'

'I'd thought of going over to the camp; she could come if she liked.' He sat down to change his shoes. Julia finally fished the necklace out of her jewel case. Putting it on she said: 'Hewett's packing gets more chaotic... Imogen may as well go riding, then. I know the camp bores her stiff.'

Peter tied a lace and said quietly: 'And her mother.'

'Her mother what?'

Their eyes met in her glass. 'Well, never mind,' said Peter. He went on pleasantly: 'Do you ever feel I get rather on *top* of you, in this house?'

'Darling'—she waved a hand to indicate the vast square room—'how could you?'

'It's not, all the same, as... free as being in town—'

'You know quite well we could have lived in a suburban semi and it wouldn't have made the slightest difference to our relationship.'

He pondered that, tying the second shoelace. 'I suppose not.'

'I'm *sure* not. What's worrying you?'

Peter stood up, straightened his jacket and said to the long mirror: 'You seem to keep asking me that, nowadays.'

'Well...? We *were* going to talk, you remember, when we came down here.'

'I know. But we don't get much chance...'

'Next week will be quieter, when these yelling kids have gone. We *must* sort it all out soon.'

'All what?' he asked, helplessly. Without replying she kissed his cheek and went out of the bedroom. Jennifer Rudd cantered up the front steps whinnying like a horse, performing a water-jump over the doormat, pursued by a pink and giggling Imogen. Mrs Stewart and her local minions were crossing the hall with trays. There was an agreeable smell of roast lamb and mint sauce.

'Ready for lunch, please, darling,' said Julia to Imogen in passing. 'Ready for lunch, everybody?' she repeated, as she went into the drawing-room. 'Mrs Stewart seems well ahead; we'll have to be quick if we want—Oh, you've *given* them sherry, Anthony. Thank you. Is that Rudd child staying, does anyone happen to know? One never know who's in the house, here; it's worse than town.—Thank you, Anthony; cheers . . . Give Diana some more; she looks as if she's had a long dull morning. You should have come to church; the hats were worth seeing. And I must warn you, Peter's invited the vicar to tea. Apart from that I think we'll have peace for the rest of the weekend. Next weekend we fill up again; we're having the Rothwells, and Jack and Althea, so we'll be as good as a houseful, because you know how Althea *chatters* . . .'

* * *

'Forty-three,' said Carol, slapping down the egg carton on the table. 'That right? What next?'

'Are there enough for breakfast too?'

'Heavens, do I have to go and count the rest . . .' She sat on the table. Drizzle clung to the window panes of the hut. In the distance a circular saw whined. 'I haven't had an awfully jolly Easter,' Carol complained.

Her elder sister, the Warden's wife, lined up three loaves in waxed paper beside the stack of food at the other end of the table and said: 'There; that's tea ready for them to do. Well, you came to help, not to enjoy yourself.' She said this earnestly, because she was an earnest young

woman, with straight ginger hair and a plastic apron over her bulging jeans. Carol sighed very loudly.

‘... This isn’t a holiday camp, you know.’

‘You’re telling *me*.’

‘Well you knew that. Honestly, Carol. You say you want to do Social Science but all you do is lounge about. It’s experience for you, if you’d only see it. You ought to be mixing with the kids. *They* work hard and you can see how happy they are—’

A horrid yell tore the air outside: ‘... *Eeyur*, come back ere wi’ that, you bastid—’ and there was a hoarse roar and a scuffle. Moira flew to the door, but the fight had already passed on. ‘I wish,’ said Moira mildly, ‘they wouldn’t fight over the tools. They’re expensive to replace, and they might hurt each other, too.’ She stayed at the doorway, watching two muddy small girls who slithered across the far end of the clearing with a plank between them. ‘It’s a pity the weather hasn’t been too good this weekend. But they’ve got quite a lot done.’

‘Poor little beasts.’

‘Oh no; they *love* it. *They* don’t come to the camps expecting to loaf about, you know. The point is that they come to work. And they get paid, a shilling a day, with overtime a penny an hour.’

‘Must ruin you.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t sneer like that, honestly. There aren’t as many funds as all that. Sometimes the local authorities help, but mostly it’s only voluntary subscription. The whole point *is* that these kids are encouraged to *make* the camps themselves, you see, ready for less fortunate children to have holidays at.’

‘Yes, you keep telling me. But these kids don’t look so jolly fortunate themselves. What the hell are the *less* fortunate like?’

‘They’re crippled,’ said Moira, soberly repressive. ‘Or mentally handicapped. The whole point is, that *these* kids who haven’t many social advantages are helped to help others, besides getting fresh air and activity—’

'If you say "the whole point is" one more time, I'll scream,' said Carol scratching her ankle.

'Scream then,' said Moira in sisterly exasperation. Turning back into the hut, she added: 'And get your feet off the table. We do try to show the campers a bit of an example, you know. The tea-fatigue should be coming in soon... Oh look,' she said at the window, 'here comes Sir Peter. I hoped he'd come while this lot was here. He's got a place near Swenbury, and that isn't far—'

'I'm glad he takes an interest,' said Carol, watching the shiny car as it turned cautiously at the camp gateway.

'Well, he does. Last August he came all the way down to Cornwall when Tom and I were at the Cliff Top camp. It'll be nice for you to meet him—Oh, don't look like that.' She was tidying round, piling enamel basins into each other and throwing cloths into a bucket; it did not occur to her to do anything about her own appearance. Carol, unobtrusively sliding off the table, smoothing back her hair, asked crossly: 'Like what?'

'Oh, you know. As if you scorned to meet the aristocracy.'

'I didn't think a *sir* was awfully aristocratic.'

'It doesn't matter nowadays anyhow. They say,' added Moira, '*she* has the money; that's what does it...'. Sir Peter was approaching; she went to the doorway. 'Hello. They're all down in the dingle there, cutting planks or something.'

'Hello, Mrs Webb.' If he had come slumming, this sub-aristocrat was dressed for it. He wore an olive-green parka and gumboots. When Moira said: 'This is my sister Carol; she's come to help,' he held out his hand with a 'nice' smile.

'That's very good of you.'

'Not a bit,' said Carol, annoyed with herself for sounding pleased.

'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No thanks. May I wander down and watch the work?'

'If you like.' Watching him go Moira said: 'He really does take an interest, you know.'

Tom Webb was more or less satisfied with the weekend's achievement. You couldn't expect much in a short 'camp', what with setting up tents and all the chores to be done. And with forty kids to organize. That was the maximum for any camp, and you could do with less in fact, but when they were all keen to come, you couldn't turn them down. This had been only an Easter affair, and as it was, all tomorrow would be spent striking camp and organizing kids back to Birmingham and Coventry and wherever. But: '... We've got all the wall planks for Hut B measured and trimmed,' he told Sir Peter. Now the building of that could be carried on by the next batch—probably at the spring Bank Holiday weekend. Hut A, finished up to the window frames, had shivered like that ever since last October half-term batch. But that was how it went. Tom Webb was a builder by trade, had found it unsatisfying and trained for social work, and had wound up like this, fiddling about with gangs of twelve-year-olds in the Culfax Camps. But that was how it went. Sir Peter didn't like them called that, as a matter of fact; they were supposed to have names—Cliff Top, Acorn, Barley Hill; this one was Glade. But the organization, registered as whatever it had to be, had Culfax Camps on the writing paper used by its only regular official, the secretary in London. It *was* fairly well organized, considering. And the huts stood up when they were finished; Tom saw to that. He had switched off the circular saw, glancing at his watch. 'Tea fatigue!' he shouted. 'Who is it? Go and get started.'

'It's Tony's lot.'

'It bloody isn't, it's *yours*.'

'It never. Is it, Ali?'

Tom's helper came wading through a pool of shavings to sort out the argument. Tom remarked: 'What with the clothes and the muck they get in, you can hardly tell boys from girls.'

'Or one race from another,' said Sir Peter. Ali had just rammed the face of his interlocutor firmly into the mud.

'I see what you mean. I think that's one good thing about these camps, you know. There's nothing like damn hard work together to bring kids together. I mean, it brings them together, if you see what I mean.' He was ready for his tea, and glad of an excuse to stop and chat. He was glad Sir Peter had come. '—Cut out that fighting, or *nobody* will get any tea!'

'Well he bloody started it.'

'Eeyur, oo did effing breakfast this morning, that's all I wanter know—'

'Belt up, nit.'

Peter reflected that, perhaps, these were not the children he could wish Imogen to mix with. She had never heard language like theirs and he would sooner she did not. But Julia had not been fair, in saying that the camps bored Imogen stiff. He felt, unusually, anger pricking his forehead again as he remembered that. It hadn't been fair at all. In fact it had seriously annoyed him.

Peter, not seriously annoyed by much, and never by Julia, was a little surprised at himself; till now, standing in the drizzle and in the camp atmosphere that, as usual, unaccountably soothed him, he recognized that he had been angry because the remark had seemed like an offence to Imogen. Imogen was never bored. He knew that. Any kind of insult to Imogen could make his forehead prick. Even Julia, it seemed, could annoy him by appearing to slight Imogen. He would have to watch that.

The tea fatigue was sorted out and sped, with yells of: '—And git on wi' it, we're bloody starving!' Tom's helper, a wiry youth in a filthy red sweater, came over and said: 'That gang's a bit stuck with the slats, I think.'

Peter said: 'We haven't met before, have we?' And Tom recollected himself and introduced them. The youth was a theological student and lived in Brighton. It was amazing, Peter often reflected, who turned up at these camps. The whole thing, which he had thought of almost accidentally, indeed to illustrate a point in a speech he was preparing on some related topic, had snowballed.

They needed a new site already and were negotiating for a piece of ground in Derbyshire. 'By the way, Tom, how would you like to do a television appeal for funds for the new site?'

'Me? Good God, no. Why me? You'd be the one to do that.'

'Well, I have, already. And I thought it would be better to have someone who's involved in the actual work. It would have more impact.'

Tom held out his grubby hands and said: 'I'd have an impact all right; I'd bust the cameras. Get Willy here to do it for you.'

Peter studied the helper critically, and then looked away, because he had been tricked again into assessing someone as an 'image'. How would Willy look to the public? (Actually, he might come over quite well. Young and zealous.) He said, smiling at the apprehensive Willy: 'We'll think about that. But what did you mean about a gang in trouble?'

Half an hour later Peter was as muddy as anyone. There was a boggy patch on the main track that Tom had ordered to be bridged with slats nailed together in a hurdle framework; to Tom, it was such a simple job that he need not oversee it. To Peter, Willy and half a dozen children it presented problems. They were in a conspiracy of shame; they dared not admit to Tom that they were making a mess of it. Willy said: 'If we had some longer nails... But these are the ones Tom told us to use...' Peter said: 'If four of us held the framework, *firmly*, while two more of us...' A perspiring small boy said: 'Ere, if we 'ad the ole thing other way up, and stuck these buggering nails in from other side...'

A girl with pigtails reproached Peter when his muddy fingers slipped: 'That was because *you* let go of it, you clot.'

When the whistle blew for tea they had to be ordered into the hut. The drizzle was thickening and, crowded round the long table, everybody steamed. The din was

tremendous. Peter tucked himself into a corner by the stove, drinking tea from a plastic beaker. He said to Moira Webb: 'I don't know how you stand this, for days on end.'

'It's better when it's fine and they eat outside,' she said, without complaint, leaning over him to scoop at a pan. 'A few more beans here if anybody . . . ?' she shouted. There was a stampede. Through it she went on to Peter: 'D'you want us here or in Hampshire at the end of May?'

'I want you everywhere. You and Tom are our main-stay.'

She gave him a shrewd and not too friendly glance. He had noticed before, with Moira Webb, that appreciative comments did not please her particularly. But he certainly did appreciate—her, as well as Tom. He had said no more than the truth. Possibly it was his manner of saying it? She was a very simple person. He looked forward to an interval after this meal when he might go over the camp's accounts with her. That was her department and he liked to show an interest. He liked, though he didn't know why, being with this plump, plain, untalkative young woman.

On the other hand, there was that job with the slats to finish . . . The drizzle was turning to rain; might Tom say no more outdoor work was to be done? But even in that case, the hut would be full of people and Peter and Moira—

He stopped that thought abruptly before it could even surprise him. He stood up and rubbed a patch clear on the trickling window pane; yes, it was definitely raining. He thought of Julia and the Raynors who had gone to see a ruined castle, and of Imogen who had gone out riding. He hoped she was not getting wet.

The rain curtained steadily across the countryside. Julia, in the shelter of a crumbling stone arch, thought of Peter and his brats, of Imogen and Jennifer in open fields, of Pam and Anthony who had taken their children to see if the daffodils were out at Tapley Park. Pam,

dragging the little boys into the shelter of budding rhododendrons, thought of Julia at her castle and of Nanny who had gone off for a nice country ramble.

Imogen, sitting quite happily on Tomahawk at the foot of Home Woods, stroked his ears with her wet string glove. She was waiting for Jennifer who had gone round by the path to jump the fallen trunks there, yelling: 'You're just frightened!'

Imogen had called back tranquilly: 'Yes, I am. I'm going to go down the main ride and meet you there.'

Jim had said: 'You do right.' Jim was on foot. He had run after Imogen's ponies with his rapid bandy strides since she was first mounted, and said he liked it that way. When she was in town he rode Tomahawk for her. He sat on the gate of the woods peeling a stick and said: 'He's going nicely, isn't he. We'll let Madam break her neck and if she doesn't we'll do one more round of the wood. It's coming on wet. You might take a little jump, eh? Just for practice.'

'I might,' said Imogen. She leaned forward and laid her cheek on Tomahawk's damp mane. The thing about being on his back was, that you couldn't see his beautiful face.

The trees were beginning to drip. Far off among them a piercing whoop indicated that Can-can had refused a jump. Lying on Tomahawk's neck Imogen thought: I wonder if it's raining in London.

She was the only one of the party at Curton who had wondered what Felix was doing.

* * *

Felix woke up in the green guest-room, at some time or other, it didn't matter. Nor did it matter, except on a Thursday, what day it was.

He stared drowsily at the window for some minutes, then yawned and rolled out of bed. Kicking about among the garments on the floor he toed up his black sweater, caught it, and dragged it on over his pyjamas. This house

was so poshly heated you didn't need slippers. There was even a carpet in the bog.

Emerging from which, Felix yawned again, scratched his head with both hands, and pottered downstairs. The secretary-girl seemed to be pounding her typewriter in the old boy's study. No one else was about. There were flowers on a table in the hall. Fancy that, when the family was away. And that sod Swann wearing his striped pants and black jacket, just to open the door once or twice in the day and tell people 'Lady Culfax is in the country'. A cushy life.

It must be elevenses time; in the main kitchen Swann, Frasquita and one of the cleaner-hags sat at the table. Swann's jacket was over the back of his chair and he was reading the *Daily Sketch*. A radio was playing. Frasquita was peeling onions. They all looked at Felix without welcome.

'Morning all,' said Felix. He scratched his head, pottered out to the pantry and came back with a loaf. Borrowing a knife from the table he cut half a dozen slices. He knew by now where the butter and marmalade lived. A kettle on the stove was steaming. 'Shove over that milk, Swann?'

'*Mr* Swann to you,' said Swann sourly. Felix reached for the milk himself. It slopped, as he dragged at the jug, on to Frasquita's onions. '*Por Dios . . .*' she muttered, snatching her board aside.

The thing was, he wouldn't even start learning the slow movement till he'd got the first by heart. And that meant, before he even tackled that, getting the ornaments worked out. The cretin editor had marked grace-notes in the central section that Felix was sure didn't exist in the original . . . He might ask Balkan. He pondered, eating his bread and marmalade.

The others resumed their conversation; Felix was not aware of being ignored. He made himself more coffee and decided to take it upstairs with him.

'Look here,' said the cleaner-hag. 'If you want me to clear up that bedroom, you do a bit to it first.'

'Okay,' said Felix pausing. 'Some time.'

'Now. It's a mess, that's what it is.'

'Oh, wrap up.'

She wrapped, pursing her mouth expressively.

'And if you want lunch,' said Swann, 'turn up at the right time. Frasquita's not keeping it hot all day for you.' Swann had put on his jacket and was arranging a cup and sugar bowl on a silver tray, ready to take her elevenses up to Margaret in the study.

'Oh, all *right*,' said Felix, wondering why they need all go on at him. He went off, leaving the wreckage of his breakfast all over his end of the table, to sit at the piano with his cup in his left hand while he tried over the grace-notes with his right.

One chore he might do, one day, was to go round to see if there were any letters for him at his digs. He'd been a few days ago—or was it a week?—but anyway there was only a letter from his mother. He'd sent her a letter too, saying he was all right. One chore he might do, some time, was to send her another. He was vague about when he'd written the last one. He was vague about how long he'd been here and how long the Culfaxes had been away.

During these weeks, it seemed to Felix that he never fully woke up. It was unnecessary. But in his dozy state he was aware of, and flirting with, danger. With music.

When he was a tiny boy the word itself—*music*—had always given him a thump of alarm in his chest. He didn't remember how it began; he had been born with it. He had been put to sleep in his infant cot while his father practised orchestral parts or the record player played. Before he was three he was playing the piano, sitting on his father's knee.

He did half remember sitting by himself at the keyboard of the piano they had in the flat in Wolverhampton—and they had moved from there when he was just four—and looking away from the keys at a picture of a cottage on the wall above the piano. The cottage had big flowers all round it and Felix wished he were there.

He had had, in fact, a 'deadly facility' for music. It had frightened as much as fascinated him, because it was too big for him. He might have been a future champion jockey, perched on a mettlesome racehorse as a baby. He loved it but it might run away with him.

So sometimes he hated it and wanted it to be quiet. He could not explain this to anybody, but it generated a deep distrust of his father, who didn't understand: Felix was afraid his father might want to abandon him to the monster. An ignorant adult, he might have tried to convince; but his father liked 'music' too; he *knew* what it meant.

It was several years before Felix realized that the special meaning of *music* applied to himself alone. Then, he simply felt that his father was no use. Nobody could save him.

The thing about *music* was that it could sweep through you and fill your whole self with nothing but the torrent of its passing; and that was all right, because you came round again afterwards—rather as if, Felix supposed, you'd taken a drug. But behind all the *music* was something worse, and unimaginable: the stupendous silence that was its secret heart. If you were abandoned completely to *music* you might be carried away with it, beyond yourself, into that.

He grew, as he grew older, braver in his experiments. He found that you could *hear* the silence in the heart of some music—some Bach, for instance. It was meant to be there. It was like the pivot, the stillness on which motion turns. It was there sometimes, just in a short phrase—a cadence, or a top note in a Mozart aria, or an accidental, a chord in Palestrina—any of these might surprise you with the ecstatic moment, the perfect delight.

But he had a nightmare too—sometimes before he was quite asleep, as he lay not quite dreaming. First of all, all the sound stopped. No special sound; just, it stopped, as if a waterfall you had lived beside all your life had suddenly dried up. Then, you got hold of a name—any

name; a composer's name, but it didn't matter which; it came to you. Silently you went on saying: Brahms, Brahms, Brahms . . . Or: Debussy, Debussy, Debussy . . . It was like a plea, to make the sound start again. You didn't exactly say it; it said itself, over and over, but you knew it would do no good. It wouldn't evoke the *music*. Instead, came the faces. Not the faces of Brahms or Debussy specially, because in any case you didn't know what they looked like; but just, two or three faces, against the dark, looking at you and speaking; anyway, their mouths were moving and they grinned; but you couldn't hear what they said. You still couldn't hear a sound. And as the grinning mouths went on mouthing you suddenly saw darkness between their lips, and you saw that the faces were only masks, thin and scooped-out, and behind them stood the dark and the silence, for ever.

Sometimes when his father said: 'But Felix, you're good, you know. You'd do so well if only you'd stick at it . . .' Felix would see the darkness between his father's lips.

They said: 'Wouldn't you like to take up music?'

In a way, Felix knew he was bound to. Or doomed to. But since his first piano teacher, no one had made it safe to. Until he went to Moshe Balkan.

Balkan *knew*. He rode his own black unstoppable horse.

Felix had dimly hoped that the college of music would 'make it all right', but it hadn't. Perversely—and in the nature of it all he was bound to be perverse—he found that the work was too strict but the supervision too light. Something in Felix would have liked to be chained to a desk and told: There you stay without food till you have worked out twenty exercises in harmony. He hated exercises in harmony and felt it hard that he should be expected to make *himself* do them.

So he had skipped college, and now he was in a dozy and perilous state. Now, he could commit himself. Between Balkan, and the quiet safety of this wealthy house, he might take the plunge and give himself to *music* at last.

He didn't know. *Would* it be all right?

If he went on like this, he might find he'd slid into it without deciding at all.

So, he sat at the piano, slurping coffee, feet bare, unshaven, picking at the turns and acciaccaturas of this rather boring sonata movement, letting the day drift by.

Margaret looked in. 'Hello, Beethoven. They've brought lunch for two of us to the housekeeper's room. Want some?'

He might as well. He carried the volume of sonatas along with him, leaving his coffee cup on the piano. Margaret was reading *Vogue* as she ate and looked across to say: 'Don't spill curry on that, for God's sake, will you. And if I were you I'd put some clothes on before the Cul's come home.'

'When's that?' he asked, rousing himself.

'In a week or so, maybe. *He's* coming up tomorrow night but he's flying to a conference in Brussels . . . There's fruit salad; want some? . . . All right, don't. I shall pick out all the cherries . . .' Faintly exasperated by his aloofness she said to the air: 'Well, Lady C. has taken up some hopeless cases before now and they came out all right. Otherwise I'd be sure she'd met her Waterloo now.' She tucked *Vogue* under her arm and tripped out.

Food was making Felix sleepy, but at the same time waking him up a little. He looked to see if there was any pudding; fruit salad, rather colourless . . . He saw why: That wench had swiped all the cherries; the stones were on her plate. God; been to Oxford or somewhere, hadn't she, and she was as piggy as his sister Fen. She might have *asked* him . . . Oh well.

He decided to go out for a bit. It seemed a reasonable day and he'd go to Mrs Thing's in case there was a letter. It was a bore, but he didn't want his parents bothering at him. Specially his father.

His father's letter, several weeks ago, had disturbed Felix just a little, because it had been his father in his easy mood, with no mention of music or careers. When his father was like that, Felix was tempted to trust him.

He didn't want to; it would only lead to muddle. Or something. The letter seemed to be mostly about Lady Culfax anyway, so not important.

Julian had written: *I don't want to do a Forsyte on you and plead the woes of the last generation, but as you know I was married to Julia at one time, so I know her pretty well, so I wish you'd believe me when I say she is the domineering type. She may be very kind but she has her own ambitions at heart. So beware. I think you'd be much better off taking your own line and fighting for yourself, if any fighting is needed, or getting me to do it for you. Remember I'm always here to help...*

For a number of reasons Felix had disregarded the letter, though it had inspired him to write to his mother in order to keep any similar letters away.

He was making for the front door before he remembered that he was still in his pyjamas and that he hadn't any money for the bus fare. Or for cigarettes, which he could do with. He was by now destitute, but he still had resources. Turning back he padded all the way upstairs to Imogen's room and tipped up her money box, a handy thing made in pottery with a mile-wide slit in the top. After a little clanking, several coins dropped out; Felix took a ten-shilling piece and a few coppers, and put the rest back. He knew where it was, when needed. When he padded down again he saw the fat woman—*Miss Hewett to you*—standing in the doorway of the green guest-room.

Damn. She'd be on at him too. She came and went; he betted Lady C. didn't know how often. Before she went away for Easter she'd been on at him about his clothes, and since then, whenever Felix didn't expect her she turned up, nagging. He had some idea that if he'd known when she was coming he'd have washed a shirt or two, or anyhow picked a few things up off the floor. As it was, he was caught. No clothes to go out in. He sat on the stairs, hiding, waiting for her to get sick of waiting for him and clear off, and going over the first movement of that sonata again in his head.

6

'I can hardly,' said Peter, 'represent Her Majesty's government in Brussels with black fingernails. How the devil does one get them clean?'

Julia, in bed, lowered her book to say: 'First of all one soaks them well in hot water—'

'My dear, I've been in the bath for a full half hour,' he protested, looking like it. His cheeks were dewy and almost pink. Tightening the sash of his dressing gown, and glancing impersonally into the mirror, he added: 'I suppose one could have a manicure in town on the way; one's going to need a haircut in any case.'

Julia threw aside her book and sat up. 'Bring me', she ordered, 'the little pink bottle marked "Chez Elaine" from the dressing-room; and an orange stick, and some cotton wool. The M.P. for Swenbury can't arrive at a manicurist's with black fingernails either.'

'Chez *who*?' he called, clinking next door.

'There's only one *chez* anybody; a little pink one...'

'You sound like an experienced *madame*,' he said, coming back and sitting on the edge of her bed. 'Wait a moment...' He spread his handkerchief under the hand Julia was about to operate on.

'Darling. I see what you mean... What *were* you doing today?'

'What weren't we. Tom wanted to get ahead with the framework for Hut C, so he and Moira brought a hand-picked gang of toughs for the weekend—including, I might say, that awful little Christine with the pigtails who tells me off...'

'You seem to have enjoyed yourself. This one's broken; we need a file... No, sit still; let me put the stuff on the others first.'

'I did, I admit it. It takes me back to Scout camps.' 'Good heavens, you never told me you were a Scout.' She worked in silence for a few moments and then said: 'Am I unsympathetic about those camps? I'm sorry.'

Peter looked tenderly at her bent head. 'No; you aren't. If you were, I could understand it.'

'Why?' she said quickly.

'Well, I do become rather engrossed. This evening, for instance, it quite slipped my mind that the Whaleys were coming to dinner.'

'Bother the Whaleys. It made quite a good impression that you had been too busy playing mud pies with children to remember about them, anyway.'

'It isn't the mud pies that worry you,' Peter suggested, 'but the impression?'

'I don't see what you mean. Nothing worries me. I'm glad to see you looking better, and getting fresh air . . . darling, I know it's all a splendid cause, but I only wonder if it isn't rather a waste of *you*.'

'Oh, quite the other way round. Tom admits I'm hopelessly inefficient.'

'Yes, well, the whole thing could just as well be left to the Toms of this world, don't you think?'

'Of all the work I've done,' Peter said thoughtfully, 'this has satisfied me most. I don't mean the mud pies—I mean the camps.'

'Yes, *well*.'

He did not ask: Well what? But his hand shrank as she gouged down the side of a nail. And Julia said: 'Imogen jumped a *jump* today. Did she tell you?'

'Yes, she did. She was really quite amazed at herself, bless her.'

They were both smiling. Not much that Julia said was basically undeliberate; it was a very basic instinct that told her how any mention of Imogen restored harmony between herself and Peter, if this were ever threatened.

'That's better, I *think*?'

He examined his nails. 'Oh, much better. Good for Elaine.'

'Now the other hand, then—'

'I wonder why,' said Peter, absently watching, 'Elaine's confection achieves what my deep scrubbing can not.... You want me to take that African Relations post, don't you.'

'But you know it isn't a case of what *I* want. The last thing I've ever been or ever will be is a pushing ambitious wife.... What I do want is to see you happy. Because I love you.'

'Yes... But just "happy" isn't enough, is it?'

'Why "just"?'

'H'm?—I suppose, you didn't mean merely contented. Negatively happy.'

'How can happiness be negative? It depends on fulfilment, surely.'

'But fulfilment of what? Oneself? Duty? I sometimes wonder if those conflict. Not in the obvious social sense, but fundamentally.'

'One has a duty to oneself, of course,' said Julia neutrally.

'Yes, yes. But doesn't that kind of statement belong to the egotism of youth—when "self" is a more simply egotistic thing? The longer I live, the harder I find it to define.'

'Self?' asked Julia. Her clear deep eyes glanced up at him under her brows.

Peter's voice became querulous, and confidential. 'I don't know when it all started. But there *is* a sense of self—of reality, you know, inner reality—that I can't find any more.'

'Perhaps you're looking in the wrong place.'

'How?'

'You won't find *real* reality by searching inside yourself.'

'That's what I feel. The more I look into myself, the more I find I'm not real. I'm just a series of attitudes.'

'Darling, how morbid.'

'Is it?'

'You won't gain anything by retreating from life.'

'But it seems to be life that paints these pictures on me... *Of* me. It's as if the genuine *me* had withered away. And all that's left is an image for the world to look at.'

'Well, what's wrong with that? The world does look at one from the outside. What else can be expected of it? It's the outside that matters.'

Peter frowned, withdrawing his hands and comparing the two sets of nails. 'I put all this so badly; I can't express it... It doesn't all arise from that chance of the African thing, you know.'

'No, I know.'

'You do?' His frown vanished. He finished the inspection of his nails and returned his left thumb for further attention. 'I felt you'd understand, yes.'

'I always try to... Doesn't one hear a lot about "images" nowadays. Everybody has to have one. Every public figure, anyway. They hire publicity firms to create them. They *talk* about them quite frankly, how they used to talk about their souls in mediaeval times, I should think—"I must look into the state of my image", you know...'

'Exactly,' agreed Peter warmly.

'You didn't hear Henry Green, when we were at the Downing Street dinner last month—I forget what he was talking about—but he said quite seriously: "Oh no, that wouldn't accord with my image." How such a fool could get into the inner Cabinet I fail to see.'

'Yes, old Henry's not among the subtlest. He's a great character, though.'

'He's got a character *and* an image, but it's the image he values more. He knows what the times require of him.'

'Yes. That's just it... *Are* there characters any more? Why the devil can't they stop posturing in front of these mirrors they carry behind them, and just be *people*?'

'Is that what's bothering you?'

'What?—That I'm not a person?'

'No, good heavens. You certainly are. More so than a dreary demagogue like Henry Green.'

'I wonder.'

'Well, don't. Wondering won't help.' She abandoned his thumb and took his hand in both hers. 'Stop pulling yourself to bits, darling, and move on.'

'I wonder about that too, though. Move on where? Sometimes I begin to think I'm out of joint with these times. I don't seem to cohere into either a character or a complete image.'

'All the same, one has to live in these times.'

'I wonder.'

'Peter.'

'Sorry... You see, I can say that to anything. And so it goes on. Even so, need the "times" be right? Is it necessary to pursue them?'

'I don't see what else. Here we are, and we have to make the best of it. We can't live in any *other* times, after all. And if you don't like them, you've got the position and the ability to do what you can to improve them.'

'I hoped so, once... But the power's lacking.'

'Darling, your powers aren't failing *yet*.'

'Not only mine. The system's. The world seems to have got out of its own control—do you ever feel that? We're not running things any more—we're running after them, trying to catch up, only just ahead of destruction—'

'You mean, bombs and things?' said Julia lightly.

'Partly. Earlier generations could hope to make a new world, but we can only hope to keep this one from exploding... There's that. And yet we pretend... I wonder,' he interrupted himself, 'whether we aren't all painting images on a doom that we genuinely believe in?' His eyes rounded, empty, and sad. He looked, as he simply considered that, a little like Imogen, who after all had not got her simplicity from nowhere.

'Oh, Peter. Everybody knows the world can blow itself to bits at any moment, but what would happen if

we all just sat down and brooded about it? Somehow or other life *does* go on. We've got to have faith in it, and faith in the human spirit . . . And ourselves,' she added, rubbing his hand between hers as if reviving him.

'Yes; I know. But I don't think, when it comes to the crunch, I've ever had faith in myself. Only a sort of habitual optimism that didn't last . . .'

'But I don't see that anything *has* come to a crunch.'

'No. Not exactly . . . Not yet.'

'And need it?'

'I suppose,' he said wryly, 'one could create an image to protect oneself against that.'

'Well, then. Do.'

He looked at her, startled. 'You'd like me to do that?'

'Well, darling, it's better than nothing.'

Is that, Peter did not ask, the alternative? He felt it was. Pretence or nothing. Perhaps that was why he was happiest building wooden huts and getting his hands dirty. A limited objective. A sense of visible achievement, even on a small scale. Someone—even little Christine from the camp—to tell him what do to.

He did sincerely feel that he had emptied his heart to Julia and he was inexpressibly sad because even this had revealed nothing to him. He went through to the dressing-room and replaced the pink bottle.

For no reason, he remembered Moira Webb in her plastic apron, cutting cheese into hunks and saying: 'The whole point is, it gives the kids a feeling of *belonging*.'

He lifted a corner of the curtain at the dressing-room window. Rain chipped at the pane. A distant hoot could have come from an owl or an engine. Tomorrow night he would be in Brussels. The week after next, Parliament reassembled. It would be another year now before he was at Curton in spring. And looking into the darkness he felt that this year he had somehow missed it.

When he went back into the bedroom Julia was lying curled up with her back to the light. He thought at first she was asleep, but then he saw that her whole

body was shaking. Her face was thrust into the crook of her elbow. He watched for a moment, aghast. Julia never cried. He went to her.

'Darling . . .'

But when he put his hand on her shoulder she said in a sharp damp voice: 'It's all right.'

'No . . . What *is* it?'

She said: 'Nothing. Nerves. Take no notice . . .'

'Is it anything I said—'

'No. It's *nothing*.' Without turning, she straightened out and relaxed, sighing. 'Nothing,' she repeated in a normal, even sleepy, voice. 'Go to bed, darling. Goodnight.'

'Well . . . Goodnight, then.'

He got into bed, and sighed too as he stretched out on his back. Julia was silent. The faintest of starlight showed at the window as his eyes became used to the dark. And how dark the nights were in the country; and how quiet. One missed the gleam and activity that, however muted or far off, let the night never quite settle on a city.

* * *

The whole house came to life with Lady Culfax's return. Even Felix might have been expected to feel it.

He had not, however, yet appeared. The high sun of a spring evening shone into Julia's bedroom, drawing sparks from the jewels she was sorting out of her case. Imogen lay across the foot of the bed, trying a collection of rings on her fingers. Hewett stood by the dressing-table, telling Julia the tale.

' . . . Never picks a thing up off the floor, and the state of his towels . . . It looks as if he wipes his boots with them . . . '

'The squalid beast. This pendant, I did need, actually; didn't I say so . . . ?'

'Not in so many words. I'm sorry. And in and out at all hours, Swann says, ringing the bell—'

'Felix doesn't wear boots,' remarked Imogen from the bed.

'I'm sorry if he's been tiresome, Hewett. But he's very young, you know. And not from the best of backgrounds.'

'I can see *that*.'

'This case is too small, really. Next time I must take the crocodile one, hideous as it is. And some of these I never wear anyway . . . I'd hoped,' she said, smiling up at Hewett, 'you'd be able to *mother* him a little. That was why I didn't take you to Curton at all. I could see he needed someone in charge of him . . .'

Hewett relented a little and smiled back. 'Well he wasn't the easiest of charges, I can tell you, Lady Culfax.'

'Poor Hewett. Darling, have you got that ugly great diamond one? . . . Yes, that's it. It should have gone back to the bank with the other things after the state visit.'

'It's pretty,' murmured Imogen, turning the stone in the sunlight as she brought it back.

'Do you think so? I wish I could lose it. But it was your grandmother's . . . Never mind, Hewett. I expect he'll be going soon.'

Imogen stood still, arrested in the motion of laying down the ring, her wide eyes watching her mother.

'Some of us won't be sorry,' observed Miss Hewett.

'I thought he could be more civilized when he tried. In fact I *was* making some impression, before I went away. I'll talk to him. You have to make some allowances, you know, for the artistic temperament.'

'H'm.'

'I'd hoped,' said Julia persuasively, 'to let him stay on here for a while—till next month anyway. You should have seen those digs he was in, Hewett—so dingy, and he was quite on his own—there was no one *there* to demonstrate the refinements of life to him . . .' Hewett permitted a slight, gratified smile ' . . . but, of course, I'm not having you put out. If he's a nuisance, we won't have him. He's got to keep his room tidy at the very least; I'll have to look at it myself and see what I think.' Imogen wandered out of the room, closing the door with her

usual quietness. 'And if you should happen to see him before I do—Where *is* he?'

'That one never knows, unless the piano should happen to be playing.'

'Well, if you see him, tell him to come to dinner this evening, and we'll see how he behaves himself. Actually he doesn't seem to have done any major damage? He hasn't set anything on fire or broken windows?'

'Well—no,' Hewett admitted.

'Oh I think we might give him another chance, don't you, really? He'll be back at the college any day, and he'll have to keep more regular hours then—This bracelet might as well go to the bank too; it will relieve the pressure in the case at least. Who gave me this garnet brooch, do you remember? Ought I to wear it? I can't say I care for garnets; they're so *glassy*-looking...'

Outside the room Imogen had run at once, spindly-legged but swift, to the green guest-room. She opened the door and was half way across the floor, leaping over the rubble, before she saw that Felix was there. When she saw him she stopped, eyes and mouth open, transfixed. He was lying on the bed apparently asleep, with a book of music on his tummy. He opened his eyes and said without expression: 'Hullo.'

She blushed. She couldn't remember what she had come for. She thought they said he was out at all hours... She could not have imagined a house where people went bursting into each other's rooms—even Mummy knocked at Imogen's door—and could not imagine that to Felix nothing was more natural. She might have been Fen come to swipe his ink or look for the dog. So he was closing his eyes again. Imogen remembered suddenly and gasped: 'Sorry, but—you see—Tidy up... Mummy's coming—'

Having issued the order she stood twisting her hands, transfixed now by her own audacity. But Felix got the message. It was not strange to him either. He rolled off

the bed and began to kick an assortment of books and clothes under it. 'Come on,' he said crossly. 'Help.'

After dithering for a moment, Imogen flew at the leather jacket which lay under the wash basin and picked it up. She opened the wardrobe to put it away, but out fell three shoes and a coke bottle and a bundled-up rain-coat. Goodness, she was making more mess than she cleared up . . . She glanced at Felix and got the idea. Shutting the wardrobe again she kicked everything underneath, and turned her attention to the rumpled towels, kicking them under the other bed. She pulled the curtains straight and tugged at the wrinkled bedcover Felix had been lying on. When she turned round, the room looked very much improved by their efforts. Felix was now sitting in the armchair by the hearth, holding the book of music in front of him in both hands as if he were about to sing. He winked at Imogen and said: 'Thanks. Beat it.'

'B-beat what?'

'Go.'

She fled. She went up to her room and stood in front of the glass, trying to wink. She was deeply impressed by the marvellous cleverness of Felix in tidying up as quickly as that. She would never have thought of that way; by herself, she would have taken hours, and then Mummy would have arrived, and known that Imogen had tidied up and not Felix, catching her at it; and Felix would have been sent away; and that would have been horrid, because Imogen had looked forward all the holidays to finding him here when they came back.

Anyway, she hoped Mummy *would* go to Felix's room now, or all the fuss would have been for nothing.

It occurred to Julia that she might go along to the green guest-room now, before she changed. She had finished her confabulation over the jewellery with Hewett, and might check for herself on the state Felix had left his room in, before Hewett or anyone got to work and tidied it for him. She tapped at the door and looked in.

'Oh—*Felix!* How nice. I thought you were out.'

She was surprisingly pleased to see him. He had been a kind of semibreve in her mind for the last few weeks; his features filled in the blank with an increased sense of his aliveness. He looked well; rather sleepy, but less puffy.

And incidentally the room wasn't too bad at all. The bedcovers had a rumpled appearance and there was still a faint smell of Felix and cigarette smoke, but the confusion was not as dire as Hewett had said. Possibly he had tidied up when he knew Julia was back; either way, it was satisfactory. Even if he had made no move to rise when she came in.

Felix regarded her without reaction. In his dozy state he could not remember what his reaction ought to be. Imogen's irruption had stirred him as it were by reflex to the tidying up, and he now realized it had been a good idea. Her ladyship had evidently come on a visit of inspection. And here he was, demurely studying the Waldstein Sonata; let her do her worst. That kid was quite useful. And he'd got her out of the way in time.

It was a pest, though, that they'd come back. He'd have to keep out of the way more, and maybe even tidy up again. He'd thought they were going to be away for a few weeks; it seemed now like a few days. He slowly woke from the deepest part of his doze under Julia's compelling eyes. He was sort of pleased to see her, only weren't there some complications to it . . . ?

Julia swung the other armchair to face his, not noticing that a scatter of toffee papers swirled in its wake. 'Well; how's it all going?' she asked.

'Oh; fine.'

'And the lessons?'

'Well. I dunno. He says my technique's lousy.'

'Yes, he said that about mine. And about Michael Goldrei's.'

'Was *he* one of his?' asked Felix with a flicker of interest.

'Oh yes. We were pupils at about the same time, though

I didn't stick it as long as Michael, of course. But then I wasn't going to make a career of it. He once told Michael he might as well stuff his fingers in his head to fill in the space there . . . But Michael hasn't done badly for himself, has he?"

'Goldrei? I've only heard him on the radio, but he was okay.'

'Felix, you'd better start *now* to speak generously about your fellow artists. Nothing sounds more ungracious than the backbiting remarks half the musical world makes about the other half. Don't get into the habit.' She smiled at him and quoted: '"Always be sincere, whether you mean it or not."'

Felix half smiled back. 'Yeah.'

'If you want to hear Michael play, he's doing the Schumann next week with the Phil. I'll tell Pat to get you a ticket—And what about the rest of it? Have you been comfortable here?'

'Here? Yes.'

'Good. You don't seem to have handled the staff very tactfully, but I'll try to pacify them. I don't want you to feel constrained in any way but I do want you to learn a few manners. It'll be a help. Are you growing a beard?'

'No?'

'In any case I wouldn't, yet. It would still be wispy . . . Well, take that travesty of one off your face, will you, before you come down to dinner. There'll only be Peter and me and Althea—Mrs Briggs, have you met her? My sister-in-law; my brother's in Berlin this week . . . Have they been feeding you well?'

'Yeah.'

'I know Frasquita's ideas do become rather oily when she's given a free hand. Still, she's a good creature. What are you studying now with Balkan?'

Felix scowled, and ran his hand over a page of the *Waldstein* as if it were braille. 'This . . . Beginning to. And the two-part inventions mostly.'

'Oh Lord, yes—what Michael used to call *bach* to

Bach! There's nothing like it though, for intensive study. Wait till he gives you a Mozart concerto... Oh, I forgot. You'll only have another two or three lessons, won't you...'

She looked at him sympathetically. She was beginning to come and go like a disturbed television picture to Felix's eyes; he was unused to sustained conversation. Blinking, he said: 'Four, I think. If he goes abroad when he said.'

'Has he said anything? About you—about afterwards?'

'No.' Felix had not thought of asking. He had not dared. There was no time beyond Balkan's departure. He looked down at his music, stupidly.

'Well, perhaps we'll find you someone else. I know it's terribly important to find a teacher who *suits* you, but there must be somebody in the world—even at that college, though your first tutor there was no good—'

The volume of Beethoven slid to the floor with a thump, as Felix shot to his feet. Julia looked at him inquiringly. Quite what he had been doing about his college work, or how he had fitted it in with his practice for Balkan, she had not in detail wondered.

Now she began to.

And Felix, at the word 'college', had woken sharply from his doze. He'd forgotten. Wasn't he still supposed to be there, or something? His movement was of flight, surprised and clumsy.

Julia asked briskly: 'Has your term begun yet? You can travel there as easily from here as from those sordid digs, can't you. In fact, it's probably nearer—'

'No,' said Felix. 'No, I can't—I *can't*—' He shouted that, because a confused panic threatened; he had been ready for none of this. He took a step back, and from this position saw Julia's head cut off at the neck by the dark green damask panel on the wall behind her. Her face, attentively turned to him, stood out whitely on shadow; it was disembodied... a *face*.

But it said incisively: 'What on earth do you mean?'

He heard that. Appealing not to her but against the panic, he said: 'I can't go to that bloody college any more. It's nothing to do with . . . *music* . . .' And uttering that word, in its secret connotation, reminded him of a new strength; *music* was on his side now. 'I want to do this,' said Felix desperately. 'I've got to—only *this*. It's got to go on like this. It's too late to bother about the other things—' He fixed his eyes on Julia's, which, bright and penetrating, kept her narrow face alive, human. 'I've found it—I'm finding it—the real thing, don't you *see*, I can't go *back* . . .' He was panting. He sat on the bed and dropped forward with his elbows on his knees. He was shaking all over. He was nearly in tears.

'My *dear* Felix . . .' said Julia. She was amazed, but impressed. This was the first time she had seen him animated. She had had no idea he felt so deeply. She stood up. 'Do you mean you've been cutting college already? *Has* the term begun?'

He shrugged, unable to speak.

'Well,' said Julia, considering, 'as long as piano is really your *thing*, and you're sticking to it, I don't myself see that all the rest of it—second subjects, and theory, and so on—matters so tremendously. You may as well specialize . . . Not everybody goes through a college. In fact I doubt that many of the really great soloists did . . .'

Felix raised his head. His face was a child's, vulnerable. 'I might not?' he said huskily. 'I might *not* have to . . . ?'

'I'll think about it,' she said in her briskest tone. 'We'll see. But don't work yourself up like this.' She came across and put her hand on his shoulder; giving it a little firm shake. At the touch she felt a first glow of physical affection for him; he was only a boy, after all. 'Come on; cheer up.'

Yet, at the same time, when she added: 'You'll have dinner with us this evening, then, will you?' she was asking him, rather than telling him. The glimpse of his feelings had given him stature; she was aware of a new respect for him.

And as she went out of the room she noticed with acute pleasure the vase of freesia on the silver cabinet at the top of the stairs. It was nice to be home... A slight depression, most uncharacteristic, that had hung over her for the last week or so at Curton was beginning to lift.

* * *

The very next day Julia had an upright piano hired and placed in the green guest-room. She wanted to give Felix every help. She thought she'd give him a few days to calm down, though, before they discussed the question of going back to college. Also she might have a word with maestro Balkan about Felix's prospects. Meanwhile, she thought over the matter herself, between the whirls occasioned by her return to town.

In a few days, she had more or less made up her mind. She said so when Althea had come to tea. No one else was there except Imogen, bidden because Althea always liked to see her. Althea was half lying in a deep chair, Julia had her feet tucked under her on the couch, Imogen was seriously biting the scallops one by one off the edge of a jam tart. The atmosphere was pleasantly 'family'. Julia was fond of Althea, who was her own kind of person, if she wasn't too brilliant; she had indeed been at Julia's school, a few years ahead of her, of course.

'... So what did *you* think of him, at dinner the other night?'

'He's a bit of an oaf,' said Althea. 'But they *are*, at that age.'

'Oh yes, it's a phase... But there's more to him than that.'

'I suppose so, if he's so musical.'

'Musical is putting it mildly. *I* think he has genius. It's difficult for me; *can* I take it upon myself, to take him away from college?' That Felix had already taken this upon *himself* she had for the moment forgotten.

'If he's getting good teaching... I don't see why not,'

said Althea. 'You've taken more than that upon yourself before now.'

'Yes, I know, I do rather rush into things. But I've got an instinct for what will turn out well and what won't. It doesn't often let me down.'

'Well, I hope Felix turns out well, then.'

'It's early to say. He's working hard, at any rate. You can see he's got that *dedicated* feeling . . . I've had a piano put in his room so that he can get on with his practising even when he can't come and use this one.'

'Which room?'—Althea noticed the possessive adjective; was Felix now established as one of the household?

'Oh, the green guest-room.'

'That's right at the back, isn't it; so you won't hear the racket all over the house.'

'I can hear it when I'm in bed,' remarked Imogen, biting off the last scallop and applying herself to the rather gooey centre of the tart. Frasquita's pastry was super-light; inevitably the unsupported structure collapsed and jam slid down Imogen's palm. 'Oh,' she said. They all laughed. One never had to correct Imogen's manners; if they lapsed it was, as now, because she was showing how happy she was to be in the drawing-room with people she need not be shy of. She was just naturally well behaved.

'Does it keep you awake, darling?'

'Does what?'

'When Felix is practising. His piano is more or less straight under your bed. I hadn't thought of that.'

'No it doesn't,' said Imogen licking jam off her hand and then using her napkin on the traces. 'I don't mind. Anyway it isn't loud.'

'Builders knew how to build, in those days,' Julia said to Althea.

'Yes, you could hardly take in a budding Rachmaninov if you lived in a council flat.'

'He doesn't like Rachmaninov . . . By the way, darling, I've got a note for you to take to Miss Fairlie's tomorrow.'

You remember this new girl arrives on Friday? I'd like you to go to meet her at the station. She's coming by boat. I'll come with you if I'm back from my meeting, but otherwise Hewett or Pat can... Her name's Yvette. We might start practising it.'

Imogen jumped slightly. 'Oh *Mummy*...'

'What is it?'

She blushed. 'I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten she was coming. Need I... I wish I needn't have her...'

'Darling, why?'

'Oh...' She was tongue-tied. Julia waited. Imogen said: 'You see I haven't had anybody ever since Jeanne-Marie and I like it. You see I can do things for myself now. You see I don't need somebody to look after me.'

'I know, sweet. You're not a baby who needs a nanny any more. It isn't like that, is it? Jeanne-Marie didn't actually look after you either. But I'd like to feel you were keeping on with talking French, because you are really getting quite good at it. Don't you like French?'

'I don't mind.'

'And, besides, you do need somebody to mend your clothes and wash your hair and do little odd jobs... And it's nicer for Frasquita and the others if there's somebody to see to your meals upstairs. They don't always have much time to trundle up and take the things out of the lift.'

'No, but I can do that.'

She was being, in her mild way, rather obstinate. Julia smiled at her searchingly.

'Don't you like somebody to eat with? Of course, soon you'll be having all your meals downstairs with Daddy and me, but you know how often we're out. We like to think you've got company. Haven't you been a bit lonely since Jeanne-Marie went?'

Imogen shook her head. 'I don't mind.'

Julia said to Althea: 'I know what it is. She's beginning to appreciate the bliss of solitude, and who can blame her. I wish I could have more of it sometimes... Imogen's

been terribly good, though. She can amuse herself for hours, and she just gets quietly on with her own affairs. When Jeanne-Marie went, it was a craze for cooking—wasn't it, darling? But now that seems to be over. What were you thinking of next?

Imogen sat up straighter, as if adjusting herself. She thought. 'Well I might do some sewing. You remember there was a sun dress in a magazine? I thought that would be difficult, but Michelette said *she* was going to make herself a frock for the summer and it's really quite easy. If you know how to cut out the pattern. Miss Johnson is going to show us. We're going to make skirts. And I thought I could make a summer frock for myself too. Do you think I could, Mummy?'

'That would be a lovely idea. You're so good at sewing anyway, I don't think you'd find it difficult at all. But if you're making clothes for yourself, you really need a sewing machine.'

'Yes, we've got one at school. Miss Johnson is going to show us how to use it.'

'Wouldn't you like one of your own, at home?'

'Oh, Mummy,' said Imogen, radiant. She beamed, scarlet with delight. She was always so pleased to be given anything; and heaven knew she was given so much, any other child would have been completely spoilt by now. But anyone could see that a sewing machine of her own was an idea that had been far from Imogen's mind. 'Could I?'

'Yes, why not.'

'You lucky little beast,' said Althea.

'Oh yes,' agreed Imogen fervently.

'Perhaps this Yvette will know about dressmaking. She might be able to help you.'

Imogen's smile faded just a little but she said: 'Yes.'

'This is the new *au pair*, is it?' Althea asked.

'Yes. We've had a bit of a gap, because the other girl's father was ill and she had to go; and then there was

Curton. But, in town, we like Imogen to have somebody, of course.'

'Oh, of course. Anyway, for going about with her. You can't have Imogen running about alone...' She left that, because Julia's face had become cold at the very hint.

(Later Althea, reporting some of this conversation to a not very attentive Jack, said: '... I only sort of suggested that Imogen ought not to run about town on her own and Julia went quite pale... You know, I simply can't imagine the effect on Julia *and* Peter if anything at all happened to that child...')

And Jack, his attention caught by the idea, said gravely: 'Nor can I. God forbid it should.')

Althea said kindly to Imogen: 'I expect you'll like her when she arrives. You must bring her to tea with us, because she might like to meet Elizabeth. It's always nice to have company of about your own age, isn't it?' She added to Julia: 'Though, what with your genius upstairs, you'll have quite a houseful of young boids.'

'Oh, I don't suppose Felix will have time to play about with French girls. Which reminds me: I ought to write to his father and tell him what I'm doing. I suppose he ought to know.'

'Yes. I hope he's grateful.'

'Unlikely, with Julian. He didn't turn out to be very grateful for all I did for him... Althea, more tea?'

'No, thanks—In fact I must go, good Lord, look at the time. Shall I see you on Sunday, then?'

'Yes. I'll look forward to it. *Must* you go, though?'

'I'm supposed to be going to this film, with the young Fitzes. Stephen wanted to see it; he'll be furious...' Kissing Imogen she told her: 'You're lucky not to go to boarding-school, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Imogen happily.

'If you must go,' said Julia rising, 'I may as well get that letter to Felix's father written while it's in my mind.'

I've got a couple more too . . . What are you going to do now, darling?'

'I'm going upstairs,' said Imogen.

And so she did, but on her way she thought she'd better go to Felix's room; she hadn't been in yet today. As she had expected, he had thrown his things all over the floor again. He was playing the piano and took no notice of her, but she was by now used to that and liked it. It was the first thing she had ever liked about him, that he didn't expect her to talk to him. She went round the room, putting things carefully in their right places. Felix's style of tidying-up was all right when you were in a hurry, but at the moment she wasn't. She folded his towels and swilled cigarette ash out of the basin, gingerly picking up the wet stubs and wrapping them in a piece of chocolate paper which she put in the waste-paper basket. When she had things more or less straight, she sat on the floor under the window, leaning back against the end of the piano. She liked the way the vibration travelled through her from the back of her head. She was not listening to the music particularly, but she just liked being there while Felix played. Imogen had, in fact, hardly any feeling for music, but even this did not disappoint Julia, who would not have had Imogen in any way different.

After a while Felix stopped and said to himself: 'Bloody hell.' He twiddled his fingers and stared gloomily at the music and then glanced at Imogen. 'Hullo.'

'Hullo.'

'What's going on?'

He was finding the kid useful as a source of such information as was indispensable for getting by in this household. She let him know about Hewett's complaints, about her Daddy's not too friendly comments on Felix's continued presence, about the hidden bolt on the area door that could be slid back if you wanted to go out at night. Swann had once showed her. Now she said: 'Auntie Althea has been to tea.'

'World news,' he muttered, flipping over the pages of

music. Imogen blushed and tried again: 'And Mummy is writing a letter to your father.'

That brought his head towards her with a jerk. 'She is? Why?'

Imogen thought. Looking up from the floor with her neck twisted she said: 'She's telling him you won't be going to the college any more because you're a genius.'

Felix thought too, not too lucidly but furiously. Good, about not going to college, but he hadn't intended to anyway. Bad, if his father were to hear about it. He'd be bound to muck things up just when they were beginning to go right.

'We've got to stop that,' he said, chewing his lips.

The 'we' brought Imogen's whole body round till she knelt at his side. 'How?' she asked seriously.

And her seriousness reminded Felix that there might in practice be some remedy. 'You', he said, 'can get hold of the letter.'

'How?'

'That's up to you. Just see it isn't posted.'

Imogen knew the note of brutal command when she heard it, though she had never heard it applied to herself in her life. She hadn't the wit to be afraid of Felix because her fear of him still half fascinated her. There was a great deal of novelty about Felix where Imogen was concerned. She knew she would have to obey him. She thought.

'If Mummy writes letters she usually puts them on the desk in her workroom and then Pat puts the stamps on and posts them.'

'Well then. Get to it. And mind nobody sees you.'

She stared at him, docile, eyes wide and dark. 'What shall I do with the letter?'

'You'd better bring it to me.'

'I see. But how shall I know which letter it is? What will it say on the envelope?'

'It'll say Julian James, or something. Appletree Cottage, Marsh Lane . . . Can you read, for God's sake?'

'Yes,' said Imogen, not offended.

She knew what she must do, then. So she went and did it. She went about it without subtlety, because it was trouble enough to keep saying to herself: Julian James, Appletree Cottage . . . so that she knew which letter Felix wanted. Repeating that address to herself (she rather liked it) she went into Julia's workroom.

'Hello, darling,' said Julia, busily writing.

'Hello,' said Imogen, and sat on the yellow chaise-longue to watch.

Julia's pen raced on. She was pleased to have Imogen there, as if a vase of flowers had been brought into the room, but not distracted. Imogen had a remarkable gift for being just quietly, idly, *there*. She never interrupted; anywhere in the house she was welcome.

Presently Julia said without looking up: 'Has Daddy come in, do you know?'

'I'll go and see.'

Imogen came back to say: 'No, Swann says not.' She sat down again with folded hands.

Several minutes later Julia said: 'Well, that's *that* lot done . . .' and stood up, energetic, slipping her writing pad into its drawer and placing a pile of three white envelopes neatly on a corner of the desk. Passing Imogen she said: 'What's the French girl called?'

'Oh . . .' Imogen screwed up her face. 'Oh, I *do* know . . . Y . . . Yvette!'

'Clever creature,' said Julia, kissing the top of her head and going on out of the room. She left the door open but went straight up the stairs. Imogen went to the desk and studied the envelopes one by one. Yes, here it was; Appletree Cottage and everything. She put the other two letters where they had been, and went off to Felix's room with the purloined one brandished for all the world to see, which as it happened it did not.

She had naturally no idea that she was doing anything wrong. Apart from the fact that she was obeying Felix, her imaginary brother, she had not yet developed any

moral intelligence. The need had simply not arisen. She did not know what 'wrong' was because she had never done any. Even as a baby she had not thrown tantrums. Once she had tipped a plateful of stewed apple, which she hated, out of the nursery window when Nanny was out of the room, but even then, the wind had caught the plateful and whopped it against the window of the dining-room far below, where Mummy and Daddy were entertaining a bishop to lunch, and the escapade had turned into a family joke.

So much cherished and encouraged, Imogen had not had to suffer inroads on her natural innocence. She was pleased that she had been able to do what Felix told her, and she hoped he would think of other things for her to do.

Felix had entered now on a state that was, apart from various minor annoyances, as happy as he could have imagined any state in this world to be. That is, it *was* still in this world, and indeed a good deal more so than his recent doziness, and the snags became more evident, but snags were essential to being alive, and gave life its solidity.

By 'life' he meant, naturally, *music*. He was surrendering at last to it, and it was his world. He was drunk with music, on a jag, spellbound.

The more he entered music's kingdom the stranger he found it to be. He hadn't *known*... He had talked as if he knew all about music until he almost believed it himself. That was a residue of the frantic burst of work he had put in when he decided to go to the College. His swagger had been protective of his ambition. Now that ambition was free to grow, it showed itself fierce but frail; he had a long way to go.

But he had started out. He saw for the first time how appallingly makeshift his piano technique was. He could have bashed his head on the wall at his own ineptitude, and now and then he did. He lay in bed exhausted, glaring at the piano: You wait till I get up, you sod—I'll show you... But when he lay in bed he never had that nightmare-vision any more.

He listened to music. Till now, he had been so eager to make his own that he had been impatient with anybody else's. Now a kind of caution had melted; let it all come; he lay on the floor while symphonies and string quartets poured over him. He hadn't *known*...

Julia had let him have the record-player in his room. She had a fair collection of records, which Imogen faith-

fully picked up again and put back in their sleeves; but there weren't enough—there would never be enough. Felix went to the local record library, he listened in cabinets in music shops, he went to concerts and recitals when Julia gave him tickets, which was fairly often, but not often *enough*. Michael Goldrei was playing in Croydon Town Hall on Saturday . . . They were playing the Shostakovitch Seventh in Guildford next week, surely there would be a train or something . . . But money was a problem. Not a snag, but an annoyance.

He was integrated, vaguely, into the household. Imogen saw to it that his room was tidy enough and that he remembered to come to family meals when invited. Julia met him sometimes on the stairs and asked how it was going, or looked into his room to give him tickets and remind him that he must have fresh air sometimes. His sir-ship said Good Morning civilly enough. There was no bother there.

But, money. So many records he wanted to *have*, and not take back to the library. One of them, anyhow, he'd broken and would have to pay for. He wanted books; and pocket scores; and piano music; and of course cigarettes and chocolate and, as Imogen pointed out, a decent shirt if he was to come to dinner with Mummy again; he seemed to have ripped the sleeve out of the last one, and Imogen had a go at it on her new sewing machine but then he spilt ink down the front of it and she couldn't cope with that.

He couldn't ask Julia for money. Not because he was so much in her debt already—Felix was unaware of that—but because she seemed to think he still had some. To explain that his grant had dried up and so had his parents, might have led to complications.

It could not occur to Julia that anyone had no money unless it were brought to her attention. She would have supposed, had she thought of it, that Julian at least gave the boy pocket money. In any case she would have said that it wouldn't hurt Felix to live a frugal life while he

was working so hard. She gave him one ticket for any concert she felt would be helpful to him, not suggesting that he might take a friend; these outings were educational, not social. Felix would have agreed.

But if anyone had told Julia that Felix had no money she would have said: 'How odd.'

Felix was an addict. If only he could have *enough* music, he would be safe. And he *must* have it. He *must* hear that Mozart quartet at the Wigmore Hall tonight. It was the Amadeus; it was a gaping void in him. He'd seen a poster in the music library, and as soon as he got back to the house he went up to Imogen's room.

'Got any money?'

She was by herself, sitting at her sewing machine. She looked at him seriously, and went to her pottery money box. She shook it; it rang a solitary coppery note.

'No, I've borrowed that already.'

'Oh,' said Imogen. She looked in her desk for her purse. Like royalty, she had no occasion to carry cash. She found a couple of lonely coins. 'Is this enough?'

'No, the bloody tickets are three times that... Where is there some money in this house?'

'Well, Daddy has a safe, in his office. I think he keeps money in there.'

'Be reasonable. All I need just now is a quid.'

'A what?'

'Doesn't your mother carry money about? In a handbag or something?'

'Mummy's gone out.'

'When's she coming in?'

'Soon I expect. She said they were going out to dinner so she'll have to change and things.'

'There you are then. Listen: You tag on to her when she comes in and get a look in her bag...' He issued instructions. 'You got that right?' He didn't suppose anyone would tear the kid apart if they did catch her pinching money, but he didn't altogether trust her not to pipe up that it had been Felix's idea. He under-estimated

Imogen, who dutifully repeated: 'Yes, I look how many pound notes there are and I mustn't take the bloody lot but just one or two if there aren't many and three if there are a lot.'

Julia, who left her handbag on her dressing-table while she went to her bath, had not much money in it today. Imogen, carrying out her commission while Hewett was downstairs bringing Mummy a 'quick cup of tea', managed to provide Felix with only one pound. He got to his recital, and was relieved.

But Julia was, like many of the very rich, exact about her petty cash. She knew quite well there had been three pounds in her handbag. There was very nearly a row. She suspected the cloakroom woman at her club, but in the end let it go. It had been her own fault for leaving the handbag beside the washbasins while she talked to Irene. She said to Peter: 'One can't trust anybody, nowadays.'

Obviously the theft hadn't happened in her own house. Only Hewett had been anywhere near the handbag, and that was quite out of the question.

Hewett wouldn't have thought of mentioning that Imogen had been fiddling about on the dressing-table; Imogen, like Chesterton's postman, was invisible to the suspicions of this household.

Imogen, who had been present while Mummy and Daddy talked, reported to Felix: 'Mummy says somebody stole a pound out of her bag.'

'Such as who?'

'Somebody at her club.'

Imogen had not known what to make of it. Stealing, she did know about. She hadn't understood that that was what she had been engaged in. Felix called it 'borrowing'. She watched his face with some anxiety; but he laughed.

'Break for us.' And as she uncertainly smiled: 'Still, you nearly had us in the muck. We'll have to think of a better idea next time . . . Now clear off, I want to listen to this.'

And he started the record player. Imogen deduced that

Felix thought the whole affair both funny and unimportant. She was mystified, but her allegiance was not shaken.

When he had listened to his record Felix remembered about the pound note. It was an annoyance. He did not quite think: With all the money that woman's *got*... He felt, though, that this house owed him something.

He said to Imogen soon after: 'Tell you what you can do. Borrow one of those fancy little boxes from the glass cupboard in here.'

He had been practising in the drawing-room and Imogen had looked in on her way back from school. She had never been told that one must not interrupt genius at work, and anyway knew quite well that her presence never did interrupt anybody. Felix was talking to her only because he happened to have finished his scales.

'Why?'

'I could pop it. Thing is, the key isn't in the door. Where do they keep it?'

'In the little gold vase on the mantelshelf, there—' She went to show him.

'Not *now*, you clot—Can't you hear that woman bringing the tea things? Later.'

Imogen told him informatively: 'When anybody opens that door, or the door of the silver cabinet upstairs, or a lot of the doors, then a very loud bell rings somewhere downstairs. It's all sort of wired up with electricity.'

'Well, thanks awfully for mentioning it,' he said in furious sarcasm.

She blushed, troubled by the contrast of his words and his tone. Was he cross? He sounded it... 'Once Daddy forgot and started taking something out to show somebody, and the bell went off and he got such a fr—'

'Never mind what Daddy did.' He gathered his music together. 'You mean it can be switched off if somebody wants to open the thing?' he resumed, thinking it over.

'I don't know.'

'Well, bloody well find out, you might.'

Julia appeared, followed by the tea trolley and Celeste

Ransome, and the conspirators dispersed. Imogen went straight off and asked Swann how the bells worked that rang when people opened the cabinets; Swann, flattered by her interest, explained.

Imogen explained to Felix. He popped an enamel snuff box for three pounds ten, switching off the burglar alarm himself while Imogen did her bit in the drawing-room.

Imogen was puzzled when he gave her the ticket. 'What's this for?'

'You'd better hang on to it. I'd be sure to lose the thing. It's what you need to get that bauble back with.'

She didn't quite see, but had to be satisfied. Felix was not patient with her stupidity. She supposed that swiping and borrowing and popping weren't at all the same thing as stealing, and put the pawn ticket in a little silk purse in her desk, where presently it was joined by others.

She thought of something. 'Felix . . . Mummy's got a ring she says she wishes she could lose. It's got a big diamond in. Would you like me to swipe that?'

He looked at her with disfavour. 'You don't know when to stop, that's your trouble. Honestly, and I thought you were a decently brought up kid . . .'

Imogen went upstairs and cried. Yvette said '*Tiens . . . qu'est ce qui t'arrive, ma petite?*'

'*C'est rien*,' said Imogen, sniffing. Yvette comforted her; that was what Yvette herself said when she cried, when Imogen shyly comforted *her*. They were on good terms.

Imogen liked Yvette partly because she kept out of her way, and Yvette liked Imogen partly for the same reason. Yvette knew that Imogen spent an amount of time with Felix but did not see why she should not; for some time she had believed Felix to be Imogen's elder brother. Much had confused her, in her arrival in this country; and she was miserably homesick.

She tried to keep it to herself. They were all so kind . . . She sat in her little bedroom at the very top of the

house, whose window showed only parapet and clouds, and wrote letters home, or wept. She told her family that it was a very easy job and that she was *très contente*.

It might have been better for her had the job been hard. With plenty of washing-up and five rowdy children to distract her she might have shaken off her homesickness. As it was, she filled her days with light jobs, dusting Imogen's room, escorting her to school or tea-parties, doing flowers, mending the few clothes that such a gentle child tore. And then in the evenings they might watch television together, and have supper at the table with its lilac-edged cloth; and Yvette's eyes would blur and Imogen would give her sweets or tell her little stories about school in her pure but hesitant French, to cheer her up. Then there were classes to go to, full of breezy girls from Stockholm and Bordeaux who were not homesick; Yvette would creep back to her room as to a refuge. And next morning, when she came back from taking Imogen to school, if she lingered in her room after taking her coat off, no one came to chivvy her. She lingered on, looking at the clouds above the parapet till they blurred again.

The days blurred. She did not need to wear her coat when she went out. Imogen was making a cotton frock, hurrying because she would soon want to wear it. The leaves were brightening on the trees below, that Yvette could not see over her parapet. Boughs of lilac were delivered for her to arrange in the huge vases in the hall. The sky was still pale as she cried herself to sleep. Soon, it would be summer.

* * *

The sky was still pale when Peter came, rather slowly, upstairs. The door of Julia's workroom was open and she called: 'Darling?'

'Hello, my dear.' He went in. She was on the chaise-lounge under one wall lamp, papers on her lap.

'Has the government fallen?'

'Not yet. But its majority has, in this instance.' He sat on the foot of the chaise-longue to tell her about it. There was nothing you could tell Julia that did not interest her; her keen attention drew the story out of him; he began to think he was not as tired as he had thought.

Lately—since the Easter recess—they had been very kind to each other. Not that they ever were not; but to this mood there was a shadow of caution; each might have been tacitly reassuring the other that nothing was wrong.

'... And I meant to ask you,' Peter said, 'about plans. It won't be long now till the Whitsun recess. Had you thought of going down to Curton?'

'I was waiting to ask *you*. Would you like that?'

'Very much, but I may be tied up. Anyway for some of the time. I hear the P.M. wants to use the break to get some of those dissidents together. It will probably be one of those informal, interminable weekends at Chequers...'

'I see. And he'd want you there?'

'Bain thought so. I was talking to him. I know most of the ins and outs of the question, I suppose.'

He didn't sound enthusiastic. But did he, ever? Julia withdrew her eyes from him, faintly sighing, and drawing figure-eights on the rough paper on her knee.

Peter heard the faint sigh, and frowned, but said nothing. He had said and done nothing for so long; he was at an impasse. He had reconciled himself to the notion that he wanted to opt out; out of that African relations job he had, but in addition to that he knew he wanted to retire further; even from Parliament; perhaps if there were a general election next year... But it was an idle dream, because it would mean disappointing Julia. She would be disappointed in him, and that he could not bear. No one ever let Julia down. In her admiration of him she was so eager, as hopeful as a child. He couldn't hurt her.

And Julia, who not long ago would have pointed out all the subsidiary advantages of even a dull weekend at

Chequers, said nothing either. She was afraid if she appeared to jolly Peter too much, it might just make him more uneasy about himself. She couldn't bear him to feel she did not admire him in every way. If she commented on any of his decisions while he was in this self-critical mood, he might take it that *she* was criticising him.

After a moment she did say, remembering: 'Oh; Andrew was on the telephone this evening. He says you want to meet Prince Mark Sibhodo, and he's going to be in town next week. Andrew, as well as the chap. So Andrew wants to bring him to dinner. I said, Thursday?'

'I wanted to meet *whom*?—Oh; well, I don't. Whatever gave Andrew such an extraordinary idea?'

'I thought it was rather odd of him. Oh dear, have I made a mix-up?'

'No, no. I'm always glad to see Andrew and he can bring any of his friends here. He knows that.'

'So that's all right? We had nothing on on Thursday. And I did think, when Andrew made such a gesture, it ought to be encouraged. You know how he hates going out to dinner himself, even with his dearest friends. Even with us, I dare say. Who is this prince?'

'From Mwalele.' He frowned, trying to decide which of the innumerable Sibhodos this could be. 'Not the old rogue from Paris with the Japanese wife...'

'Andrew didn't mention a wife.'

'No, and even Andrew would hardly turn up with old... Joshua. That's *his* name. I remember,' said Peter, who always did when he put his whole mind to it. 'This one is an undergraduate. Oxford.'

'Well, that rather alters the complexion of the evening. I'd been thinking of Maud and Sybil, you see, for Andrew and his elderly friend, but we can't confront a student with a pair of dowagers...' She twitched a sheet of clean paper from under her figure-eights and went on: 'You. Me. Andrew... I know. Let's make it a youthful party and make Felix come. He can hire a dinner

jacket and wash his mop, and it will do him good. So then we'll want two young girls. It might do Elizabeth good, too. Jack's Elizabeth. She's rather gawky, for seventeen . . . And Philippa Hart-Steyne, don't you think? She's such a nice little thing, and a friend of Elizabeth's—'

'I suppose what it is,' said Peter, 'is that Andrew thinks I'm still interested in Mwalele. If you remember, he hasn't been in town since February, and at that point I was still thinking of the African Relations thing . . .'

'Yes,' said Julia. 'You were, weren't you.' There was a pause. Then she twiddled her pencil, glossing over that, and said briskly: 'But it's so like Andrew, you know, to be several months behind the times.'

'Yes,' agreed Peter, rushing with her into the breach. 'Well, that sounds very pleasant.' To show he had been listening he recited: 'Andrew's student and Felix, Elizabeth and Philippa . . . Which still leaves us with the problem of finding a dowager for Andrew.'

'It is a problem, rather. I can't think of *any* woman Andrew cares for . . .' She pondered, and suddenly said: 'Imogen.'

'Imogen?'

They smiled at each other. 'She's Andrew's favourite woman, I'm sure. And she *would* love it. It's about time she did begin to come to grown-up parties sometimes. And this one isn't going to be too grown-up, and what with Felix who'll probably sit with his elbows on the table and slurp his soup, and the African boy who for all we know will turn up in native dress, and Elizabeth who's her cousin anyway—it's not going to be a particularly formal affair. She won't be too shy.'

'She could have a new dress?' suggested Peter.

'Yes, of course. A long one. It will be her first—except of course for her bridesmaid frocks, but they don't count . . .'

'I'm beginnnng to look forward to it,' said Peter cheerfully.

* * *

'A d-dinner party?' Imogen gasped.

'Only a small one, darling. Daddy and I think you'll enjoy it. And what would you like to wear? We'll go to Rosine's tomorrow afternoon.' Miss Fairlie was not strict about absences, which was another good thing about that school.

'I won't have to drink wine, will I?'

'Poppet, what ideas you get. No, you can drink anything you like. We'll have pineapple juice—you like that best, don't you.'

'Yes. But . . . talk to people?'

'Uncle Andrew, and Felix? You know you aren't shy of Felix any more. And Elizabeth's coming. Besides, you're so good at talking to people now.'

Not entirely convinced, Imogen sped off to tell the news to Felix. Julia had waylaid her on her way in from school. Felix would be in; he had said he wasn't going out at all today.

'*Felix*,' said Imogen, virtually bursting in on him. 'There's going to be a dinner party here next Thursday and you and I have got to go to it. In a long frock. Me, I mean. Uncle Andrew's coming and a friend of his . . .'

'Oh well,' said Felix, indifferent. He was sorting over some records on the floor. Noticing his indifference, Imogen was amazed by it, but it calmed her own nerves. If somebody could care about it as little as *that* . . .? He added: 'Brought my fags?'

'Oh, no. I'm sorry. You see Yvette was there, and I said I just wanted to go into this shop for something, and she said what, and I knew she wouldn't let me buy cigarettes, so I didn't know what to say, and I said it didn't matter.'

'Balls,' said Felix. 'You're no bloody use. Hadn't you the sense to say you wanted to buy sweets or something?'

'But I didn't. Oh Felix, I'm sorry, don't be cross. If I'd said that, it wouldn't have been true, and she wouldn't have believed me.'

'That,' said Felix coldly, 'is because you're a lousy liar.'

'I'm sorry.' She sat on the floor opposite him, appealing across the scatter of records. 'I don't think I'd be good at telling lies.'

'It's simple enough. All you have to do is believe yourself.'

'How do you mean?' she persisted, anxious to learn.

'Well, you twot, how *do* I mean. Look somebody straight in the eye and whatever you're telling them, tell yourself it's true.'

'I think I see...'

She did see that telling lies was outright serious. She had fallen down on this with Felix before; he had told her to tell Hewett it was Yvette who had let the upstairs bath overflow, and she'd made a mess of that. But she would tell lies for Felix, if only she could. Only, it made the whole thing more dangerous—dangerous, that is, to her friendship with Felix. Imogen sensed that it would put her more at his mercy. She minded, and didn't mind. By now, she was fairly well aware that she was his slave; she would have to trust him.

'Anyhow,' said Felix, 'nip out and get them now. I'm busy. And I've been without all afternoon, waiting for you.'

'Oh, but, I'm not supposed to go out by myself.'

'God, what *are* you? A babe in arms? I can see Fen talking like that—"I'm not supp-eosed to geo eout bay mayself,"' he mimicked hideously.

Imogen's lip quivered. 'All right,' she whispered, and went. The nearest shop for cigarettes would be the one on the corner of the mews, down the back street on the other side of the square. It wouldn't take long, if she ran all the way. And there wasn't actually, she told herself as she slipped out of the back door, a *rule* that she must not go out by herself. It was just that they didn't like her to.

She was beginning to quibble with herself; it was a sign of an awakening, and disturbed, conscience, that was unlikely to develop very healthily under Felix's

direction. She even thought, all of her own accord, as she ran: Might it have been better to swipe some cigarettes for him out of the silver box in the drawing-room?

She was surprised when the man in the shop asked her suspiciously: 'Who are they for?'

'Not for me,' Imogen told him. She drew a breath and looked him straight in the eye. 'They're for my grown-up brother,' she said, and, to her own astonishment, she believed it when she said it.

* * *

Felix was, evidently, in a sulk about the end of his lessons with Balkan. Julia could get no sense out of him. But as it was surely this week that the lessons were supposed to end, she decided to telephone.

Felix had muttered some tale about Balkan's staying in London for a few extra weeks but Julia fancied she had better check. It would be too funny if he pulled the college trick again, pretending to be going to Balkan when he wasn't.

However, that was hardly probable. And Sara Balkan, who answered the telephone, backed up Felix's story. She went into a rigmarole about some special heat treatment Balkan was having for his arm, and a specially good doctor at the hospital here, and how Balkan must give the treatment a fair chance, because it might clear up the trouble for ever, and what an almighty relief *that* would be.

'Oh, I'm sure it would,' said Julia, sympathetic.

'You want to talk to *him*?'

'If I may. About Felix.'

'Oh. That boy. *Moshe*...'

As she heard Balkan lift the receiver, Julia felt a distinct thrill of apprehension. Her voice was apologetic as she said:

'I wanted to ask you, maestro, about Felix... And it was with an unusual effort that she interrupted herself: '—But how is your arm?'

'It's fine. Well, coming along. It's all Sara's idea that I stay over and give it another couple of weeks' rest. Hers and this doctor's at the hospital. They may be right, but my agents are pretty mad.'

'So can you be bothered with Felix for that couple of weeks?'

'Sure. It'll give me something to do.'

'Oh, that is good of you. Tell me,' she asked with another effort, 'how is he doing now?'

'Well, he's fumbling more, you know how it is. Losing confidence.'

'Maestro, how *dreadful*—'

'N'hn. The best thing that could happen to him right now. He's beginning to wonder if he's as fabulous as he thought.'

'Oh. I see. But will he . . . pick up again, do you think?'

'In time. He's got the right stuff.'

'That's rather what I wondered . . . His parents haven't taken the slightest interest in him. They didn't even answer my letter, when I wrote to tell them he'd left the college. So I suppose it's up to me to make any further arrangements. Do you . . . Would you think of keeping him on? Is he worth that? If I sent him with you, when you went home . . .?'

'Jesus, Julia, I've got a million pupils over there I've neglected for three months already.'

'Oh, I know. It's asking far too much. And I don't even know how it could be done—with currency allowances and visas, and all that sort of thing . . .'

'*That* could be fixed, I guess.'

'Could it? Even if it took a little time. He might have a holiday, visit his family for a while and then come on after you . . .' She saw it all happening. Checking her impetuosity she said: 'I wish you'd think it over, maestro.' And then, breaking out again: 'When do you think he could be ready—if he's slipping back, as you say. Will it be a long time before he can play to an audience—even a private recital . . .?' Because, suddenly it was be-

coming possible; she was beginning to see Felix the end product, the future, beyond the clumsy lout she had taken into her house.

Balkan would not commit himself on this. He said, though, that he'd think it over about keeping Felix on as a pupil. And added that Julia might start seeing about passports et cetera, in case.

In *case* . . . 'I'll see about it. Thank you. And I won't say anything to Felix yet. I don't want to build up his hopes. He's more excitable than you'd think, under that off-handed manner.'

'I've noticed,' said Balkan drily.

'Yes, I'm sure you really understand him. That's why . . . Tell me, now you've seen more of him, *do* you think I've spoilt him?'

'Did I say that?'

'Something to that effect. You said it wouldn't do him much good to have a rich patron. Do you remember? I know how to take advice, when it's from someone worth listening to. And I've been very restrained with Felix and given him the bare essentials—a roof and a piano and food . . . How do you think he's developing as a character?'

'He's a character, all right,' said Balkan.

Peter, crossing the hallway between his bathroom and bedroom, glanced up at a scurry of movement above. Light from down here turned the dome of the high window to ultramarine; it was almost dark. He was tired, and already had one hand on the top button of his jacket, ready to undress. He paused to watch Imogen, a wraith in white spotted pyjamas, flitting past the banisters of the upper floor with a coat or something in her arms. It was time she was in bed. What, he wondered indulgently, was she up to?

She had disappeared—along, presumably, the back passageway. Peter heard a door open—and he heard a burst of piano music. The door closed again.

Piano. Good God. She couldn't have gone into that boy's... He was half way up the stairs before even incredulity struck him. As he reached the top step there was another swell of music, the closing of a door; he and Imogen confronted each other in the passageway. Imogen, running, stopped short. She was carrying nothing; her hands flew up and clasped against her chest, in the surprise of this meeting.

'What are you doing?' asked Peter.

He asked it in all the sharpness of new anxiety, that was itself as sharp as terror. She stood there, thin as a rail in her ridiculous spotted nightwear, frills round her shoulders and under her knees; her feet were bare and her hair streamed back behind her shocked face, white in the shadow, with wide, darkened eyes staring unrecognizing into his.

Daddy had never spoken to her in that tone before. She was coldly horrified. In a small voice she said: 'N... nothing.'

They looked at each other like strangers.

'Go up to bed, at once,' Peter told her.

She fled, her pale feet flickering on the carpet of the upper stairs.

Peter turned and went down again, and straight to Julia's room. He tapped and entered. Julia had not yet undressed. She was sitting at her dressing-table writing in a notebook, while Hewett's vast back end emerged from a cupboard on the other side of the room.

'I must talk to you,' said Peter.

Julia glanced through her glass at his stiff face. She said pleasantly: 'Yes, darling?—Goodnight, then, Hewett. You toddle off to bed.'

Hewett closed the cupboard, said goodnight and toddled cumbrously out. Peter began at once: 'Imogen was in Felix's room just now.'

'It's time she was in bed,' said Julia, perfunctorily.

'Julia. Don't you understand?'

She turned round, laying down her pencil. 'Well, it was naughty of Imogen. What was she doing there at this time of night?'

Peter could not speak. His frozen expression caught her full attention; she tilted her head, studying him, puzzled; then she laughed.

'Oh, Peter. For heaven's sake. What are you imagining?'

'That must be obvious.'

'It isn't, and it's anyway absurd. Look at their ages. And look at Imogen . . . And Felix is probably as innocent as she is.'

Peter was pacing the room. He turned at the head of the bed to say in a dry curt voice: 'That boy leaves this house, at once.'

'Rubbish. Don't be so dramatic. Go to bed, darling. I'll talk to Imogen, if you like. And Felix. But we can't—'

'He leaves this house.'

Julia, disengaging herself, with an air that said plainly: I will give *you* a moment to compose yourself, turned away and took off her necklace, laying it tidily on the

dressing-table. She smoothed back her hair. Peter was provoked into saying with a flash of anger: 'If you think—I'm not prepared to take *any* risk with Imogen.'

'Nor am I,' said Julia calmly. 'But there *is* none, where Felix is concerned.'

'I tell you there *is*.'

In the glass, she looked at him coolly. Neither spoke for some seconds. This situation was new to them.

Peter broke first. He came towards Julia again, saying with an impatient wave of the hand: 'Very well, I'm dramatizing. But in sober fact, I'm not having that boy here any longer. There's no reason why he should have come in the first place.'

Ah, said Julia, to herself. Then aloud, 'You resent him.'

'That's by the way. When it comes to a question of Imogen's safety—'

'She's safe with Felix, don't you worry. He's not quite the type of friend I might have chosen for her—in fact I don't know that they *are* friends; Felix hasn't much time for friendships—but he'll do her no harm. You can be sure of that.'

'I'm far from sure of it. He can go, tomorrow.'

'You're being ridiculous.'

That was how she saw him, stalking about in that poker-faced fashion, laying down the law like a Victorian paterfamilias whose daughter's honour is threatened.

'I assure you I'm not,' said Peter.

She closed her eyes for a moment, not wanting to see him—Peter—making such a pompous display of himself. The moment was sickening; during it, she felt, something woke in her, protested, fled. She felt tired. She said: 'There's no question of sending Felix away.' And she saw that that was true. She now felt the same kind of nervous tremor that had attacked her when she telephoned Balkan, two days ago. Felix *mattered*.

She opened her eyes, adjusting them at last to a change that had been only slowly forcing itself on her. It was

Felix whose ambitions counted with her. Peter's she had, as he had, relinquished.

I've *tried*, she reminded herself, detachedly watching this cardboard dummy of a man as it rather pathetically struggled for dignity, as it towered above her striking attitudes. I've done all I can. For years, I've given him all I can . . .

'You've done all you can for him,' Peter was saying. 'More than he has any right to expect.'

'I intend to do a great deal for him yet.'

The tone of that checked him. She was leaning back on one elbow against the dressing-table, watching him with a half smile that was curiously irritating. As he peered at her she sat briskly upright and went on: 'Felix has genius. He needs good teaching and the right kind of encouragement. There are only one or two musicians like him in a generation. You probably don't understand, but one has a duty in a case like his. A duty to music—'

'Yes, yes. But that's no reason to have him in the house,' Peter persisted.

'At present, it certainly is.' She wasn't going to explain it all to Peter, but this stage was important. Felix would have to be carefully prepared in all sorts of ways for his foray across the Atlantic. Just now, he needed special reassurance.

'I don't see that. Give him lessons by all means. Buy his clothes and send him to concerts. But let him find his own social level. You won't help him by trying to train him like a performing dog—'

'Oh Peter, be quiet.'

She had never taken quite that tone before. Peter sensed that she was eluding him. Habitually, he apologized.

'I'm sorry. Naturally I don't understand his problems as well as you do. But I still don't see what advantage it has been to him, or to us, to have him here. He doesn't behave like a civilized member of the family. And when he does come to meals, you allow him to behave

as he likes. You're not trying to improve his manners or—'

'No. You don't *see*. These things have to be done gradually. I'm not trying to turn poor Felix into a deb's delight—'

'Then why', asked Peter blankly, 'have him here?'

Julia lay back, letting her head fall as if she could bear no more. Raising it after the demonstration she said patiently: 'Because it is in his best interests, to put it simply.'

'Well, it isn't in anybody else's,' he retorted. 'Look here, it isn't as if you couldn't afford decent accommodation for him. You could find somewhere better than this—better for him. I don't see why you need put yourself out, when it isn't a case of *having* to take him into your own home...'

He put this awkwardly, because it touched on a topic he and Julia had never discussed. What he meant was: You can buy your way in and out of anything, with all your money... But he could not have implied that.

Julia's attitude to money Peter had never understood. He had been brought up to consider his own family fairly well off. His father had been a solicitor in Bath; there had always been enough. There had been enough for servants and public school fees and a generous allowance for Peter when he went up to read law at Oxford. But in his circles money was never *mentioned*. There was that kind of modest unawareness of it. He knew that there was poverty; he knew that there were boys at school who *had* to win scholarships; he knew, by hearsay, that there were people who were very rich, but Julia was the first he had had to do with.

He could not imagine that anybody who had a lot of money could fail to be somehow vulgar about it. There *was* something essentially vulgar, in Peter's circles, about wealth. He could conceive of wealth only in terms of possession. People who had money must be conscious of

it, and use it, flashing it about or hoarding it, but in either case using it.

He had not imagined money without its obverse. Money was what you *had*, therefore poverty, or carefulness, was what you avoided. He had never met anyone to whom money was not a possession but an attribute. He had met plenty of people who did not talk about money, but no one who did not think of it.

Never to have to think about money leaves a blank in the normal personality. The wealthy, however they try, are never quite 'like us'. A whole range of anxieties and doubts and previsions is denied them. The blank is filled in with a kind of assurance, a non-doubt. Julia had never doubted herself, in a way that Peter could not fathom. He could not guess that money could be integrated into a personality.

Julia quite often said that money did not matter to her, and he had the intuition to see that that was because it never had. But he had always had a respect for her, almost an awe, that defied analysis. Had it been suggested to him that this was because of her money, he would have been appalled by the vulgarity of such an idea. It was for this self-obscuring reason that her essential non-vulgarity never ceased to impress him; though, in the same way, he would not have understood what exactly the quality was.

Tonight he knew he was helpless before her, but did not see how. A smoothness in her assurance reflected back only his own weaknesses. She said, in answer to his last remark: 'You don't understand, do you.'

Her tone dismissed him; he stood silent.

Then he remembered. All this had started, not about Felix, but about Imogen. That was different altogether. His anger sparked in him again; his forehead pricked. He sat down on the side of Julia's bed, immovably.

'Do what you think best, then. But I'm not having that boy in the house, and that's final.'

'Peter, don't be exasperating. I've told you why I intend

to keep him here. For a few more weeks, anyway. After that, he's probably going to America. I *did* tell you.'

'Yes, I believe you did. But a few more weeks could do the damage. He goes now.'

'He doesn't,' said Julia unruffled.

'You're putting him before Imogen?'

'That's nonsense.'

Julia could not see that there was any 'putting before' at issue. What she did see, as she studiedly turned away again and took off her watch, was that she genuinely could not bear to part with Felix now. Her ambitions were identified with his, and inevitably a kind of affection came with them.

Of course, if Peter made a fight of this, it was technically and legally his house and he could dictate who was to live in it. But if it came to a fight, Julia would fight for Felix.

But there would be no fight. Peter hadn't the energy. She wound her watch, looking again in the glass at him as he sat sulking on the bed.

'I never imagined you could fail in your duty to Imogen. I always thought you were devoted to her.'

That was monstrous. 'You're tired,' said Julia icily. 'You'd better go to bed.'

'I'll go when I please,' he said, distinctly peevish. His face was a little flushed and his eyes, rounded, stared at the carpet. He clenched his hands. 'You refuse to get rid of that boy, then?'

'Of course I do.'

'I shall have to take the only other course of action, and take Imogen away.'

Julia spun round. 'You'll do nothing of the kind.'

'She is my daughter and she is in moral danger.'

'What rubbish.'

'That is for me to decide.'

'It certainly isn't.'

Peter ignored her, still glaring at the carpet. 'I have

no alternative. I shall arrange for her to go to a boarding-school, or, till then, out of town.'

'You can't.'

'Indeed I can. I shall send her down to Curton tomorrow, with that French girl.'

Julia, who was never annoyed, flew into a rage. Tears stung her eyes. 'You will *not*. You will *not* do anything so stupid. You wouldn't have the . . . *impertinence* to take Imogen away from me.'

He said coldly: 'I consider you unfit to be in charge of her.'

'It isn't for *you* to consider—'

'Apparently it is.'

He had gained some advantage. They both appreciated that; there was a pause, while Julia blinked the tears of frustration from her eyes, and Peter stood up, as if about to go. Their glances met, accidentally; his was expressionless, but his mouth was rigidly set. Where Imogen was concerned, he could fight and, it appeared, win. Where Imogen was at issue, the current between them was of pure hatred.

'If you had any concern for her,' began Julia furiously, 'you wouldn't take her away without warning from her school, and friends.'

'I can find her a governess, and she has friends at Curton,' said Peter unmoved.

'You're being so idiotic. There's no *need* for any of this. And Imogen won't go away without my permission. Ever.' She was trembling.

'Send that boy away, then.'

'I *see*. You've fabricated this whole thing because you want to get rid of Felix. You're jealous of him.'

'Of *him*?' He was startled.

'Because he's young and promising and is going to amount to something in this world.'

'What nonsense.'

'Anyone could see it. It's petty and spiteful beyond anything . . . I'm losing all respect for you.'

She was standing, as if she could have flown at him. Peter looked at her uncertainly. Neither of them was used to this sort of thing. Peter had never had a row with anybody since he was a schoolboy, and Julia had never in her life been so point-blank opposed in anything important.

‘We needn’t’, he began, ‘squabble about it—’

‘What a stupid word. No, we won’t squabble. Peter, don’t you *realize* what you’re doing. Trying to wreck our family life and Felix’s future and Imogen’s happiness, only to gratify your own vanity?’

‘Now’, he said wearily, ‘*you* are dramatizing.’

‘You’d like to think so. But I’m seeing things simply as they are. This has made a lot clear to me.’ She was regaining her dignity if not her temper; her assurance, Peter felt with a sinking of heart, was undisturbed. He did not know why he had been glad, a few moments ago, to believe he had punctured that . . . It had almost seemed that, in spite of the violence of this dissension—possibly because of it?—they were drawing closer than usual. He moved slowly to the door as she said: ‘. . . You try to explain how you’re not sure of yourself, and want to *find* yourself, and all that rubbish—whereas the truth is that you’ve lost yourself, and you know it. You’ve been *weakening* for a long time. You admit it. I admit it, now. For a *long* time I haven’t. But when I see you punishing other people for your own deficiencies—I just don’t understand you. Perhaps I was mistaken all along. You’ve relied on me more than I realized. I hoped so much for you, and *of* you, and you’ve crumbled away . . .’

He had disappointed her. He put the thought aside. It was too painful, for the moment. Again he was distracted between this débâcle and the other question . . . Oh yes: Imogen. He must get Imogen away; that was decided.

If this were victory, it did not gratify him. But he held on to it. In his naïve and obstinate way he knew that his first duty was to Imogen.

'My dear . . .' he said in vague protest to Julia, his hand on the door knob.

'Very well. I needn't say any more.'

In that indeterminate silence, as he turned the knob, Peter remembered something. 'Oh; tomorrow we're having that dinner party, aren't we. And Imogen was looking forward to it.'

'Yes,' said Julia. For an instant, though Peter did not turn, there was a ghost of the old shared smile. He said: 'Let her stay over tomorrow, then. Goodnight.'

He went out, aware that Julia had not returned the goodnight. The silence continued in him as he went to his own room.

* * *

Flend's idea, granted that Peter might still be considering the African Relations office, was not altogether batty. He had been quite proud of himself when he thought it up. By introducing Peter and Mark to each other, he would give Peter the chance of catching a Sibhodo young and possibly taming it; and that might count for a lot, even in ten years' time, in the politics of that part of Africa; while at the same time, Mark might make the kind of acquaintance who would be of use to him in his own future, and give him some aura of respectability.

What Mark and Peter would make of each other personally, Flend left to them. He did not consider himself competent to speculate on others' relationships, and nor was he. He didn't see why the two of them should not hit it off; Peter could be kind enough, if his manner was sometimes stiffish; and Mark was respectable enough, if he had elected to dress for the dinner party in a lemon cravat and pale blue ski-pants.

All set, himself, for a wretched evening, spruced into his dinner jacket, Flend set out in a taxi from his club and picked up Mark at the flat of some Bayswater friends. Mark came running up the area steps, between pots of

geranium, slipping cuff links into his white silk shirt. 'We're early, aren't we?'

'Are we? I forgot what time Julia said.'

'You said, seven-thirty, when you invited me.'

'Oh,' said Flend. 'I thought perhaps it was seven.' He saw nothing that could be done about it, though from the alarmed bulge of his eyes one might have supposed him in an agony of social embarrassment. Mark, who knew him well, supposed nothing of the kind. He too let the taxi bear them on, so that they arrived at the Culfaxes' house at thirteen minutes past seven.

Swann showed them into the empty drawing-room without reproof. 'No one here,' commented Flend. He folded himself on to the couch while Mark strolled across to admire a silver bowl of roses. 'People of culture, your friends,' he remarked. 'The obvious place for these would have been on the piano, wouldn't you say? So, they play it?'

'Piano? Oh yes. Julia's musical—Tell you what I might do, while we're waiting. I'll go up and have a word with Imogen. The daughter, you know.'

He left Mark without apology, merely adding: 'Can you find something to read . . .?' and climbed the stairs to Imogen's room. He did not know she was to be present at the party.

The room was empty. Imogen, dressed, was down in her mother's room, having her hair polished with a silk handkerchief by Hewett. From the mild untidiness up here—a cotton dress flung over the bed, socks on a chair—Flend supposed Imogen might have gone to have her bath. He stood idle, stroking the back of his head. It was very quiet. He drifted off into recollections of a thesis one of his students was engaged in. Extraordinary ideas, that young woman had. Tumuli indeed . . . His eyes fell on the toy theatre and he wondered whether Imogen had carried out her idea of . . . what was it . . . *Les Sylphides*? The curtains were closed. He folded himself

down with his spiky suppleness on to the floor and drew them back.

The stage was occupied by a bundle of material—scraps of flowered cotton, as if Imogen had been dress-making. But behind the bundle, and under it, he could see tiny figures with black silk hair crowned with the tiniest of plasticine discs, like white flowers. There was a backcloth, blue, with trees... Flend pulled out the bundle of cotton and from its midst, with a bonk, slid a glass paperweight. It was the one that had been Imogen's favourite when she was little; 'the one with an eye', she used to call it, fitting it into one of Uncle Andrew's eye sockets and giggling at the effect. Flend tossed it up and down and then set it aside and began to stand the little dancers up on the stage. She'd put a lot of work into this ballet, too. Fiddling job, these frilly nylon skirts... She didn't seem to have fitted up her blue floodlight, though...

Someone came into the room. He turned his head to see a girl in a red dress, with reddish eyes. She was disconcerted to find a gaunt man in a dinner jacket sitting on the floor absorbedly playing with the toy theatre; she jumped back, running the back of her hand across her eyes.

'Hullo,' said Flend. 'What's the matter?'

'Is nothing...'

'Oh.' He goggled absently at her, concluding that nothing was the matter with Imogen.

She offered bashfully: 'I find myself a little 'omesick, is all.'

'Oh,' said Flend again, accepting the explanation without feeling obliged to offer sympathy. 'I was looking for Imogen.'

'Oh, she is gone down. To the party.'

'She is, is she.' He hauled himself up. 'Goodbye,' he added from the doorway.

Peter was by now in the drawing-room with Mark. Mark stood with his back to the fireplace and Peter,

seeming to prowl, was over by the far window. They had glasses in their hands, were not speaking, and both turned quick, hopeful faces as Flend came in.

‘Ah, Andrew—it’s good to see you.’

‘Hullo, Peter. Hullo, Mark,’ said Flend as if he had seen neither of them for three months. ‘You’ve met each other, then?’ he admitted, making an effort to do the honours.

They had had ten minutes of each other. When it had been established that Peter had met Mark’s grandfather and various of his uncles, and that Mark was not in Peter’s old college at Oxford, they had both begun to feel their association unfruitful.

‘What will you drink, Andrew?’ said Peter thankfully.

Flend had no sooner collapsed himself on to the couch with a sherry than Julia came in. He dragged himself up, remembering that he wouldn’t be allowed to sit again till they got to the dinner table. That was one of the minor formalities of this house. Well, he’d known what he was letting himself in for, and it was all in a good cause.

‘Andrew dear.’ She patted his shoulder as she passed in a flash of dark blue and diamonds, making for her introduction to Mark. ‘You play the piano, I’m told?’ said Mark bowing slightly over her hand. Andrew hoped he wasn’t going to be tiresome. Though the alternative, with Mark, was to be outrageous.

‘Felix does that. I hope he’ll play for us later . . .’

If Peter were a little stiffer than usual, and Julia a little more animated, their present company would not observe it. Peter gave Julia some sherry and she asked Mark what he was reading at Oxford? He told her, PPE; she said: ‘Yes, everyone does, nowadays.’ Andrew felt she had summed up Mark in one of her glances. Shambling away to the window he said: ‘Here’s somebody arriving.’

‘It will be those two . . .’

‘Those two’ came twittering upstairs, rather charmingly ruffled, like fledgelings diving into the sunny evening,

tumbling past Swann before he had decently announced them. They were very young and full of themselves; Elizabeth tossed back her hair extravagantly as she protested that she was sure to fail her A Level art, whose exam took place in a fortnight; Philippa darted at the roses in a swirl of pink skirt, pushing her face among them and saying: 'M'm . . . Gorgeous . . .'

Mark eyed them distantly.

The door opened again, hesitantly, and Julia said in a casual tone: 'Oh; here comes Imogen.'

Here came Imogen, very straight and prim, in a dress of raw silk that hung straight and prim to the floor. It was the colour of her hair; she was as shiny and brittle as a straw angel for a Christmas tree. No make-up; no jewellery; only, to give her something to do with her hands, a gold mesh purse on a golden chain, to carry. She stood gravely while they all looked at her. She was palpably holding her breath. There was silence in the room. Then, in the heart of it, she moved forward. She blushed, and made for cover, saying quickly: 'Hello, Uncle Andrew.'

But she had made her entrance. Its success was proved by no one's praising her for it; even Elizabeth did not say: Oh Imogen, you've got a long dress on . . . And no one said: How nice you look . . . They absorbed the effect and conceded it to her.

Peter silently gave her a glass of fruit juice and conversation began again. Imogen was now very pink. She downed half her glassful at one swig, drew a deep breath, and met Julia's eyes. Julia winked at her. Imogen laughed, and clutching her glass in both hands, her gold purse dangling from her wrist, set out on the ordeal of 'talking to people'.

Andrew now looked at Julia, and beamed. Elizabeth and Philippa looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Mark looked at Imogen in continued appraisal. Only Peter and Julia did not exchange glances.

They circulated:

'... tickets for Wimbledon, of course . . .'
'... long dry spell, hasn't it . . .'
'... rising cost of living . . .'
'... absolutely fab, but I was at school, so . . .'
'... for the Whitsun recess . . .'

Imogen came to stand facing Mark. She looked at him, beginning to wilt. She'd said to Uncle Andrew and to Philippa and to Elizabeth that it had been lovely weather; she'd better not say it again. Mark said: 'Do you come here often?'

'I live here.'

He relented. He smiled at her. She thought. She asked: 'Why do you wear blue trousers?'

'Because I prefer not to look like the conventional Balliol wog.'

'Oh.'

Peter overhearing that, gave Mark an irritated glance. Andrew intercepted it. He said, anxious to help: 'Mark can dress to suit any company.'

That was not conspicuously well received by anyone. Into the pause it occasioned, Julia said: 'We're waiting for Felix now. Where *is* he?'

'Oh—' said Imogen, making for the door as if it were she who had forgotten him.

'Let Swann go,' ordered Peter, loudly.

Presently Felix came in, rather surprising Flend, who had not seen him before, but did vaguely remember who he was supposed to be. He *looked* like an overblown adolescent Hamlet, with his dark jacket and flowing yellow locks and a manner both distract and distraught. He gave the company a cloudy grey stare and no apology.

Elizabeth and Philippa exchanged glances; they had not met Felix before either. They both glanced from Felix to Mark and back at each other. Julia was amused. If it came to a share-out, which young man would have the more exotic appeal? She said: 'Well, let's go in . . .'

Flend was thankful. The sooner they ate, the sooner they could get away, and he was beginning to suspect

the evening was not being an outstanding success. He was placed between Imogen and Philippa. In spite of the sunshine outside, green candles were lit among the white azaleas and trailing ivy down the centre of the oval table. The effect was tranquilly submarine. Flend appreciated it, and also the food, which was generally one good thing about going out to dinner, except that one had to wait so bally long between the courses. He had scooped up his fish before Imogen, daintily erect beside him, had eaten a quarter of hers.

He put out his hand for the book that usually lay beside his plate, remembered where he was, and sat back, resigned.

The conversation, begun by Julia and those flappers, was by now more or less confined to those two and Mark, who seemed to be making a hit with them. Flend noted that he thought of them as the 'young ones'. Imogen did not accord with his definition of 'young'. He supposed it was a kind of dignity in her, inside that shyness.

Swann was bringing round the next course. Good.

Having cleaned his plate while the others were beginning to nibble at theirs, he turned to Imogen. She was talking to no one, but she had little chance. The other girls were yelling at Mark, Peter was frowning to himself, Felix miles away with one elbow over the back of his chair.

'I went to look at your theatre,' Flend mentioned.

'When?'

'Before dinner.'

'Oh.'

'I liked your ballet.'

'It's in a bit of a muddle. I haven't played with it for a long time.'

'I see you've got your favourite paperweight up there. The one you used to call the "eye".'

Imogen turned to him with her straightest wide stare. 'Oh, no I haven't, Uncle Andrew. It's still in the cabinet.'

Flend was puzzled. There couldn't be two like that . . . ?

He didn't see what she could mean. But she had applied herself to her food, her averted cheek outlined in pink.

‘—Uncle Andrew, *you've* been to Greece!’ Elizabeth was appealing to him. ‘Isn't Delphi the place where . . .’ He wondered why he had come to be ‘Uncle’ to all Julia's young relations. For some reason he didn't much care for it; except from Imogen; Imogen was different.

Imogen was different. He was still puzzling about it. It was more than the long dress.

Fresh strawberries; good. But from this stage, the whole dinner party began to seem pointless to Flend. No one had been unkind enough to tell him that, indeed, it was; he was oblivious to the general lack of focus, and a tendency for heads to turn this way and that, looking for . . . Who had not arrived? They seemed a small party.

Julia, conscious of this, did nothing about it. Her head ached, and although she was the last person to let minor maladies interfere with social duty, she saw nothing valuably social in this gathering. Her eyes rested on Imogen from time to time; otherwise she was not pleased with any of them, least of all with this cheap-sarcastic young African whom Andrew had foisted on them.

Andrew was making no effort; even by his standards he was being remiss. Felix was making no effort either, but that in a way she could allow for. He had been in a difficult mood when he came back from his lesson with Balkan today, and she couldn't understand why; she had gathered that Balkan had referred, at last, to the American project; but whatever he had said seemed to have made Felix angry. Of course, with such a complicated character as Felix's, reactions were not always straightforward. He might be overwhelmed at first by the idea . . . Or, more likely, the maestro had said something tactless; she could remember, all too well, that he didn't allow for much sensitivity in the young . . . She must have a talk with Felix. First thing tomorrow, perhaps, when he had had a chance to sort himself out . . . She shivered. She

turned to Swann: 'I think we might have that window shut?'

She had spoken quietly, but everyone looked, first at Julia and then towards the open window. They all noticed it at once: The sun had gone in. More than that, the sky was darkening with dense cloud. The candles threw living gold on the azalea petals and Imogen's hair.

'It can't be going to *rain* . . .' Philippa exclaimed, as if that would be a last straw.

Flend screwed himself right round and gazed at the window in a hopeless dismay.

* * *

In the drawing-room the electric fire was on when the gentlemen arrived, and the girls huddled wintrily by it. Large spots were smacking at the window panes and sliding deliberately down, leaving tracks silvered by the undecided sky. The smell of coffee was consoling.

Conversation hesitated. Imogen, not allowed coffee, sat upright in a gilt chair with her hands folded and eyelids sleepy. Felix stood leaning on the piano, brooding.

Unexpectedly, Peter said: 'Felix, won't you play something for us?'

His tone was, Flend considered, either over-polite or slightly offensive. However it did not account for the sullenness of Felix's: 'No.'

Julia said quickly: 'Imogen, darling, I think we'll excuse you now, if you're tired?'

Obedient as ever, Imogen did her tour of the room: 'Goodnight, Elizabeth . . . Goodnight, Philippa . . . Goodnight, Mr Mark . . .' She shook hands with him, and kissed her mother and father and Uncle Andrew. At the door she turned back: 'Oh—goodnight, Felix.'

That Felix did not reply to that, seemed to put a final damper on the atmosphere. Julia began pouring more coffee, but Elizabeth and Philippa turned their backs on the rest of the room, cornering Mark. Peter began to talk with energy to Flend about agricultural prices, but

quite soon Flend, as if bored beyond endurance, hauled himself off the couch and wandered about the room.

He was not bored, because he hadn't been listening to a word; he was self-distracted. Puzzling, he realized that there was one simple way of making sense of it: He went to the cabinet and peered in at the shelves of snuff-boxes, paper-weights and ivory carvings.

'Can you see, Andrew? It's getting dark in here . . .' said Peter the unfailingly courteous. He came over and switched somewhere, and the interior of the cabinet was illuminated.

The 'eye' paperweight was not there. Flend was pretty sure of that, though he could not remember how the things were normally arranged. They seemed, this evening, sparser than usual altogether. Well, it didn't matter, but—

'I don't want to look at them, thanks,' Flend said, with no very gracious effect. But Peter, not insisting, switched off the light again.

It didn't matter, but—'Oh well,' said Flend aloud, which had to serve for excuse or explanation, as he strode out of the room. Peter frowning after him murmured: 'I hope he hasn't *eaten* something . . .'

'It's more likely that something is eating him,' remarked the young Sibhodo, whereat the girls shrieked with laughter.

Peter and Julia sat, distant from each other, affecting to listen kindly to the increasingly silly chatter of their remaining guests. Felix had, no one noticed when, gone.

Flend slowly climbed the stairs. Curiosity as much as anything drove him up. Not satisfied, he might pull anything apart to find an answer, quite blind to his own destructiveness. But when he saw Imogen his mind swerved.

She had called: 'Come in!' to his knock, and was sitting at her desk in a green dressing-gown, writing. She beamed at him. 'Oh, Uncle Andrew!'

'Hullo.'

‘I’m writing my diary. I keep a diary now. Would you like to see?’

‘Isn’t it private?’

‘Private?’

‘Diaries are supposed to be. . . . Did you enjoy the party?’

‘It was *lovely*. I was glad I sat next to you. And I didn’t have to talk to anybody very much.’

‘You looked very nice.’

‘So did you,’ she said kindly.

Towering over her, stroking the back of his head, he looked at the toy theatre with its closed curtains, and in spite of himself:

‘Look here, my dear; what was that tale about the paper-weight?’

‘Oh, yes. That was a lie,’ said Imogen.

‘I did wonder.’

‘But you believed me, didn’t you?’

‘Of course.’

‘I believed myself,’ she said.

Flend stared at her. His eyes, for once not goggling, had a strange stillness. ‘Where is it?’ he asked.

‘I swiped it.’

‘I see. Why?’

‘We’ve got a system. I swipe them and Felix pops them.’

‘Them? What else?’

She opened a drawer in her desk and took out a purse. Flend gazed down at the pawn tickets. ‘Snuff-boxes too?’ he mused. ‘I thought the shelves were scanty. . . .’

‘Yes, some snuff-boxes, and a silver thing out of the upstairs cabinet, and . . . some things.’

‘What do you want the money for?’

‘Felix wants it.’

‘I see. But I’m surprised you wanted to pop the “eye”.’

Imogen blushed. ‘I didn’t much. Only it was one of the littlest and wouldn’t show so much. Felix has been busy, so I have to keep it till he can pop it, you see.’

Flend had the answer to his puzzle, but it had led to another. He sought about for a way of asking. *Did* she

know what she was doing? Just how stupid was she? Because it was Imogen, curiosity could be inserted gently, a ferret into the burrow of her hidden mind.

'Tell me about Felix,' said Flend.

Imogen told him. She didn't realize till now how much she had wanted to tell somebody. It was all so different, with Felix; she was more and more adrift with him. '... you see, I pretended he was my brother. He called me "sister" ...'

'I see.'

Partly, Imogen was relieved to have told somebody; partly she was worried.

'... Some of the things, like telling lies, are wrong, aren't they, Uncle Andrew?'

'Very wrong.'

'But I couldn't help it, you see.'

The plea from the dock; the plea of the psychopath ... What he did see was that it was no use expecting her to resist Felix. Good, obedient Imogen.

'I suppose not. But it won't do, you know, my dear.'

'Uncle Andrew. ... You won't tell Mummy and Daddy, will you? They might be cross with Felix.'

'I'm sure they would.'

'Well then, you won't, will you?'

What he could not possibly tell them—and his eyes bulged again at the thought—was what Imogen had been up to.

'I suppose I won't,' he said, sadly.

* * *

But as he wandered downstairs he knew that something would have to be done. Stupid that child might be, but it made her more defenceless. He shuddered, recognizing how easily she could step straight from innocence to a life of crime, with no idea what was happening to her. And it could happen. She had looked him straight in the eye at dinner and told that lie like a natural.

Peter and Julia would flatly disbelieve him anyhow, if

he tried to tell them. Even if he showed them the pawn tickets in Imogen's very desk.

And, much as one would like to see that Felix get his comeuppance, Imogen would suffer for it. She was a born gangster's moll, it appeared. An ethical sport.

No, it wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all.

'Are you all right, Andrew?' asked Peter, approaching as Flend entered the drawing-room.

'All right?' echoed Flend fogily.

'What about a drink?'

The party was about to break up. Mark had, it seemed, offered to take Elizabeth and Philippa to pick up his friends and go on to a club to hear the wizzes. What was a wizzle?

'Uncle Andrew, even *you* have heard of the Wizzes!' Elizabeth accused him. Julia appeared, saying: 'Yes, your mother says it's all right if you're in by twelve. What about yours, Philippa? Perhaps you'd better telephone her yourself.'

'Thanks awfully, Lady Culfax—'

'But you needn't go yet, Andrew,' Peter protested, seeing Flend about to be swept up in the departure.

'I think I'd better,' said Flend gloomily.

Yet at the very last minute, when Swann and Mark had packed the girls into a taxi, and Mark had climbed in after them, and Swann had climbed back up the steps, Flend strode up after him and said: 'Just a moment—'

Swann, hearing that through the crack of the closing door, opened it again, and Flend hastened past him and upstairs, past the open door of the drawing-room, up the next flight, slinking, a shadow. He knew it must be one of the rooms up here. . . . Opening one door after another he finally came upon Felix, lying on a rumpled bed in his rumpled dinner jacket.

'Look here,' said Flend.

Felix looked, stonily, without moving.

'This business with Imogen has got to stop.'

'M'm?'

'She's been telling me about it.'

Felix closed his eyes. 'Oh, shut up,' he said bitterly.

Flend was shaken. He did not think highly of the manners of present-day students, but they were ill-mannered as a mob; individually he found them fairly civil. He had never come across a one-man mob like Felix.

'You'd better leave her alone in future,' he said, weakly.

Felix conceded: 'Who?'

'Imogen. You're teaching her thoroughly bad ways.'

'The kid's a fool.'

That infuriated Flend. 'I know,' he said, his face turning a pale mauve, 'but that makes it worse.'

Felix did not answer. His eyes were still shut.

Flend had come here on impulse, having thought of nothing to say. He could still think of nothing. He had dimly imagined some kind of confrontation—'Your crimes are discovered!—but this boy would not even care. This did no good. He would have to tell Peter and Julia after all.

At least... 'The best thing,' said Flend, shaking with rage but still helplessly reasonable, 'would be for you just to go away. You can't stay now. Get out before they throw you out.'

There was no response. Flend, twisting his hat between his hands, waited for a moment, then admitted failure.

He felt an utter fool. Nor could he think what to do next. If he told Peter, but not Julia... or Julia, but not Peter? He was confused. He'd have to think about it. He was out of his depth in all this.

He even, mechanically, said: 'Goodnight' to the body on the bed before he slunk downstairs again and let himself out of the house.

9

Felix opened his eyes and saw that that old streak of doom had gone. He regretted him; it might have helped, to strike up some sort of a conversation, even about Imogen, and Felix had begun to realize this and to make the effort. Now, he lay staring at the ceiling, cold and lonely.

He wished somebody would come. He wished simply anybody would come. He felt sick. He wanted his mother. He drew up his legs and turned on to his side, huddling.

He had begun to tell himself, as day by day the end of his contact with Balkan approached, that he'd have to kill himself. He saw nothing ahead except the . . . silence. He knew it was there.

Out of his dozy state of the vacation weeks he had passed into a frenzy-state, as he submitted to his addiction to music, but at the back of his mind remembered that there was a term to its circumstances. If only he could have *enough* music. . . . He had been stupefied by it for the last several days, clinging to the green guest room and identified with it till, leaving it, he would leave himself behind.

It is difficult for children to see why they need put the demands of everyday life before their own ploys, why they need clean their teeth before they play cowboys. It is more difficult for talented children who intuitively know that painting a picture is more important than making your bed. For the creative adult the conflict can become impossible; he *can't* work for eight hours in a bank and then come home and write poetry. One or the other goes. For Felix, very young and undisciplined by himself or anyone else, ordinary life had gone, and during the last couple of weeks had gone too far away. He had *been* nothing but music. He was only at all himself when he

was in this room. Everything else was a kind of sleep-walking. He had been to Balkan's flat, as in a dream, but otherwise hadn't been able to go out at all.

And then, today, Balkan had said: 'We fly on Tuesday.'

Felix had thought: It won't matter. I shall be dead by then. Or I shall go back to my room and stay there and never come out again. He looked stonily at Balkan and said: 'Okay.'

The everyday world, immaterial, was muddled for Felix; he regarded Balkan suspiciously because he felt a kind of guilt in his presence; Balkan's statements, criticisms, wisecracks, items of information had been as it were tossed lavishly around during their few meetings, and Felix had taken them away with him and treasured them because they were the only *real* things the everyday world gave him; they were hard and bright and colourful like the objects that passed from the Culfares' house to the pawn-shop, about whose passing Felix had no guilt; that had been transferred to Balkan.

Even to the pop-shop he hadn't been able to go, just lately. This morning he had found a paperweight, a silver candle snuffer and a jade figure in his jacket pocket; he had opened his window and hurled the lot far down the garden. He had no money, and could no longer care.

So he said to Balkan: 'Okay' and turned, ready to go.

'Well,' said Balkan smiling, 'so long, then.'

And when Felix was at the door he added: 'And do something about those staccato octaves before I see you again. Let's have them straight from the elbow.'

Felix looked back, his face glowering with amazement. 'See me again?' he echoed, unwillingly.

'Sure. As soon as Julia's fixed it. She didn't tell you yet? You're coming to the States after me. If she says so, you will, too. So—see you. Good luck.'

He had of course no idea that the suggestion was quite strange to Felix, or what he was doing in flinging it at him like that.

Felix was, as Julia had guessed, overwhelmed; but not in quite the way she had supposed. He was terrified.

He scuttled back to his room like an animal to its lair. The contrast was too great: from this drugged security, to the other side of the world, to vast unknown places. It had been too sudden; from dull expectation of death, to a widening of life. The guilt was too heavy; it was as if his thefts from Balkan would be exposed now—the whole *world* would know.

He had screwed himself up so tightly for the parting from Balkan that now the whole thread seemed to slip and loosen. He moped round his room while the record player thundered out Berlioz, but he was not listening. The sound went round and round in him. When Julia dropped in to ask how his lesson had gone, he snarled at her. When Hewett appeared with the hired dinner jacket and a new shirt, he was lying on the floor with his head on his arms and grunted at her. When Imogen crept in to tidy round and remind him to dress, he ignored her.

When Swann came to summon him to dinner, Felix followed him as if sleepwalking. The whole dinner party was like a dream. He could eat nothing, but he drank a glass of sherry, a glass of white wine and a glass of red. It wasn't enough to make him tipsy, although he had drunk nothing but shandy in his life; but it made everything even more dreamlike.

And then he came back to his room and felt safer, but it was chilly, with rain dribbling down the window, and he felt sick, and lay on the bed without putting a record on the player, nauseated by the quiet, waiting till he felt a bit better and could get up and deal with it. But he knew he would never feel better, never move or leave this room again. He was beaten.

When Flend walked in, Felix saw him through a spangle of dizzy stars and heard him from a distance. Only when Flend had gone, and he lay huddled, longing for any comfort, did he begin to take in what the old fossil had been saying.

'... You can't stay, now. Get out before they throw you out.'

They? But he must stay. There was nowhere else.

He buried his face, hiding, pretending he was dead.

His inside was churning and his forehead cold, but his eyes were hot with tears. Physical misery overtook all other for the moment and he rolled off the bed and was sick in the washbasin.

Then he stood propped against the piano, shivering.

Get out before they throw you out...

It was so quiet. Nobody came.

They couldn't throw him out, not out of his room...

But the very manner of Flend's arrival, materializing like a spook into Felix's wretchedness, had uneasily reminded Felix that 'they' existed, those powers he had dodged; they hadn't been destroyed. *They?*

They were after him. He *had* to get out.

Paralysed, he clung shivering to the piano. His will was paralysed by this terror that washed through him and back, from every direction. He did not identify it as terror; it was just a *nothing*.

At any rate, he began to notice, he had got up off the bed. He could move. He might get out... into the nothing.

But there was nothing here, either, now. No music. No safety.

Out... Well, surely there was somewhere?

There used to be quite ordinary streets, with bus stops, and trees in the square, and paving stones... Panic dissolved them, but still there must be *somewhere*...

As if he were sleepwalking, Felix came dimly to himself to find he was struggling with the bolt on the side area door. He stopped, undecided. It was so quiet. Everybody was asleep. Everybody was dead? What the hell was he *doing*?

But he couldn't. Not by himself. *They* might be waiting outside the door...

Felix turned back and padded up the stairs. He had had

an idea. He had remembered that there was somebody who might have come, somebody useful if a fool. He vaguely thought he might push Imogen out of the door ahead of him and see what happened to her. Then he would follow if it were safe.

He went into her room and stumbled over to the bed, putting out a hand in the faint light of street lamps far below, touching her hair and grasping the welcome warmth of humanity in her thin shoulder.

'Wh—what . . .' murmured Imogen making to turn over.

'Get up.'

She woke quickly at his tone. 'Oh. Felix . . . ? Oh, Felix; what's the matter?'

'We're going out. Get dressed.'

For a moment, he would rather have lain beside her and wrapped himself in the comfort of her fine sheets and silky sleepiness; but: Get out. Before they throw you out.

'Buck up.'

'What,' asked Imogen, standing in the rosy glow of her beside lamp, 'had I better wear?'

'God, what does that matter. Get *on* with it.' As he heard his own voice he felt his inside grow steadier. He sat on the bed, scowling but calmer, as Imogen hurriedly put on her underwear, a pair of slacks and a sweater, and shoes.

'It's raining a bit; had I better wear my raincoat?'

He did not answer, so she took it from the cupboard. She laid it over a chair and picked up a comb.

'—What the hell are you doing?'

'Doing my hair,' she said nervously.

'Oh, never mind. Come *on*.'

She pulled up the hood of her raincoat over her tumbled locks and they went downstairs, Felix shoving her ahead of him. She knew he would be going to the side area door. It was the only way, at night, because it had a burglar proof bolt instead of being connected to the alarm system, as Swann had once explained to Imogen;

she had forgotten why this was. She trotted up the area steps and found she was in a night-world, the world she sometimes saw from her bedroom window but had never walked in. The square was empty and the trees sighed in a cool wind. Long stripes of light hung on the wet pavements from the lamps. 'Where are we going?' she ventured, at the corner of the square.

Felix didn't know. He was reassured to find that 'outside' was possible; now, he wanted just to go, as fast and as far as possible. He turned left, at random, and walked rapidly; the breeze cooled his hot face.

'You'll get wet,' Imogen said, hurrying beside him. 'You should have brought your raincoat.'

In the next street she said: 'Look at that man. Is he *drunk*?'

As they crossed Bond Street a police car went by and she said virtuously: 'D'you think they're looking for thieves?'

Felix did not mind her idiot remarks. Beginning to tire, and to forget, he was not sorry to have her with him.

Imogen had some idea that she was witnessing the wicked night life of the capital; but it was not long after midnight; people and traffic had not quite vanished; Mark Sibhodo had only just delivered Elizabeth home; Flend, at his club, had gone straight to bed and was sleeping dreamlessly; Julia and Peter, who had parted without words as soon as their guests left, had gone to bed early and Peter was still awake, reading a paperback whodunit he couldn't get the hang of; Julia had taken aspirin for her headache and was drowsing, on the edge of a dream about skiing; tomorrow Imogen was to be taken down to Curton, but Peter had said no more about it yet; tomorrow she would deal with that.

'How far are we going?' asked Imogen at Piccadilly Circus.

On; just on; away. The exercise and his tiredness, the dark of night and brightness of shop windows and lamps, the sense of distance crossed yet of reaching nowhere,

had brought Felix to a mental limbo. America, Balkan, his room, the old spook, everything had been left behind in another life. His head was black inside. In the blackness pictures began to flash—piano keys; wine-glasses; a cottage with flowers round it—‘Oh Felix, be careful!’ sang Imogen, clutching his sleeve as he stepped off a pavement. A horn yelled at him. He scowled and tramped on.

He was trying to remember a name. Just behind consciousness it thumped at him. Pallid in a street light a poster floated by him, some of the words catching at him like brambles: . . . HALL, Wednesday 17th . . . MONTEVERDI . . . VESPERS 1610 . . . Soloists: . . . Tickets . . .

That wasn’t the name. Monteverdi. Monteverdi. Mon—*Stop it.*

It was too late to stop it. It was always like this: Any name would do. It was always like this, the nearly-asleep clarity, and the sound drying up. . . . He looked at Imogen; she opened her mouth, looking back at him anxiously, but said nothing.

No sound came. Monteverdi, Monteverdi—

No. Please. . . .

It would be the faces. The sound had stopped.

Felix stopped. He held on to a railing and stared about him. A car slid by, its engine ticking. Two men walked ahead, footsteps clacking on the pavement. He could *hear*. Then, why had the sound stopped?

Monteverdi. *Monteverdi.*

Imogen said: ‘Felix . . . What’s the matter?’

He *heard* that, but when he looked at her her face was like a mask, scooped out under the pale hood spangled with rain. Between her lips was darkness.

He had always known it would come to this. He had been driven out of his only refuge and there was no *music* . . . Only lost, in a dark strange city. Nobody could help him now.

Three faces hung in front of him, briefly, their lips moving and grinning. He tried to say: *Monteverdi* . . . But his own mouth was full of darkness.

• He was walking on. Go, go on, away, maybe they can't keep up if you go fast enough...

Look, this was all right. This was London, there were people about, it was real life. It wasn't a nightmare.

Imogen was holding his arm. 'Felix...'

'Go away,' he shouted.

She was what was the matter, hanging on to him with her white frightened face and squealing. He must get rid of her.

There must be something he could do; go to a pub, a coffee stall, a...? There *must* be reality, to fill in the darkness.

'Felix...'

He was sitting on a doorstep. Funny. He must have flaked out for a minute... 'What?' he said.

Imogen put her arms round him. 'Oh, what's the matter?'

He said: 'Go away. Go home.'

'You come home too.'

'Shut up. Sod off.' A place, he must find, where there were real solid people. He'd be all right. Only he must get there quickly. He jumped up, reeled a little and set off. Imogen ran after him.

'Go *home*,' he said, as if to a dog.

'Please, Felix—'

She was crying. She wasn't a bad kid. Only she couldn't help. He said wildly: 'I haven't got any money.'

Imogen shook her head miserably, then put her hand in her raincoat pocket and brought out a little leather purse. It was one she took to Miss Fairlie's, when they had to take money for anything. But she didn't think there was any money in it now, because she'd taken her offering for the earthquake victims and put it in the collecting box. Felix snatched the purse and said: 'Now bugger off.'

'I don't think there's any—'

He didn't let her tell him, but put his hand right across her face and gave her a shove that sent her sprawling

backwards. She picked herself up, straightened the hood of her raincoat and looked at him, anxious, uncomplaining. Felix said: 'If you don't go home I'll bloody well bash you. Now go.'

'Will you be all right?'

'For God's sake, do as you're *told*.' He swung away. After a few paces he turned; she was watching him, standing there. He said: 'Goodbye.'

She ran to him, and he regretted that impulse of kindness. It had simply brought her back. She threw her arms round his damp shoulders but said: 'Goodbye, Felix. Come home soon.'

And this time, she did go, at last. At the corner of the street he looked back; so did Imogen, from the far corner. She waved to him. He shouted: 'Go *home*—' and shot round the corner.

Once he was running, he kept on. Now he was free. Now he could find what he was looking for. He ran blindly. The pavement dropped away under his feet and he stumbled, but kept on. A car approaching sounded its horn, more in reproof than in anger, and the note was of the pitch and duration of the first chord of . . . The Brahms third. The second chord sounded in Felix's head. Then the whole splendid sweep of the orchestra poured after it.

Music.

That was what he was looking for. He had known it would be all right.

Breathless, he slowed, and leaned on a lamp post, while the torrent of Brahms roared through him. But when he looked up, the wide street was quiet; a man in a Homburg hat had paused and was watching him suspiciously. Felix walked on.

On. Where was the music?

He ran again, trying to make as much noise with his feet as he could, to show himself that the sound hadn't stopped again. It was raining heavily now. He skidded on the wet road surface and a car horn blared again—and killed the sound. It all stopped.

- No, God, not the *faces* . . .

They shone on a glossy and shifting darkness. It was the river. He lay over a wide stone parapet, with no more breath left. He couldn't even raise his head. The faces mouthed at him, smiling, on the surface with its ripples of light. They rippled at him, gibbering, on the depth of black water.

'I can beat *you*,' Felix shouted at them. He dragged himself back off the parapet and forced himself on.

It hadn't been like this before. He'd forgotten what it *had* been like, but it had never been as bad as this. There was nobody to save him. He wished he still had that kid; why the hell had he sent her off? There was nothing real now, nothing left, except the faces.

At least they were still there. He seemed to get no further from the river. Every time he looked over the parapet the river was still there. The faces floated along, keeping pace with him.

Why couldn't he go away from the river and leave them there?

Because there was nothing else. There was only the faces, or the dark silence for ever.

He kept stopping to look over the parapet, to make sure they were still there.

They looked back at him, silent in his silence, waiting.

He stopped at last because he was too tired to go any further. He slid his body on to the cold stone, cold rain trickling down his spine, too cold to care.

He couldn't see the faces. He had no thoughts or fears left; only, it was as if he dreamt he was still on his bed in his room, feeling sick and waiting for that old spook to come in.

None of it had happened. It had all been a nightmare.

So he could go to sleep again. Sleep was the same as the darkness, the darkness was the silence for ever below him, which the faces had left, leaving nothing behind them, leaving him to nothing. He belonged to the dark

now. It could claim him. There was nothing. Only nothing...

With a sigh, as of a child turning over in its sleep, Felix wriggled round and let himself fall into the nothing.

The tide was out and he fell on to mud, rolling and choking, sinking in a slime more inert than he.

* * *

Before that strip of mudbank was covered by the tide of the next morning, a PLA launch passing by noticed the hump in it. Felix had rolled over till his face and shirt were no more white than the slime.

Peter was in the house when the police telephoned. They had been efficient, because the only means of identification was a little leather purse in Felix's pocket, inside which 'Imogen Culfax' was printed in Indian ink.

'Yes. . . . Yes, I see. . . . Yes, of course. . . .' Peter said steadily into the telephone. When he rang off he looked at Margaret with a stern abstracted face and asked: 'Where is Lady Culfax, do you happen to know?'

'I'll find out, Sir Peter. Pat will know.'

'It's Felix. He is in St Martin's Hospital.'

'I see.'

Julia had gone on from a charitable coffee morning to lunch at Celeste Ransome's house, where she was run to ground. She went at once to the hospital and was told to wait in a small room at the end of a wing. Pigeons rustled past the window and an old lady in a straw hat read ancient magazines. Presently, to Julia's surprise, Peter arrived.

'What are you doing here?' Julia asked him.

'I wondered if there were any news . . .'

'They say he has a strong heart. Otherwise, with the exposure and asphyxiation he'd have been done for at once,' she told him briefly.

'Is there anything to be done . . . ?'

'Not at present. I think they're doing as well for him here as anywhere. The doctor seemed very competent.'

‘Good.’

He sat down. Julia said: ‘You needn’t stay.’

‘I’d like to.’

She reached for a magazine.

After some while Peter cleared his throat. ‘I had no idea he was out last night. When did he go out?’

‘My dear Peter, how do *I* know?’

He said: ‘I was so much occupied myself, with that telegram about reduced market rates coming through so early—’

‘Yes, all right,’ she cut him off, indifferent. But after another interval she said: ‘I wanted to see him myself this morning, but I had some letters, before that coffee thing.’

‘It wouldn’t have made any difference,’ Peter said, awkwardly. ‘If he hadn’t been in his room, we wouldn’t have known where to look. And by that time they had already—’

‘Yes, all right,’ said Julia, reading.

A nurse came in. To the old lady she said: ‘Well, Mrs Hartley, if you come through now we’ll let you see him for a minute.’

Peter and Julia looked after her, incredulously, as one looks at an unexpected letter when it turns out to be addressed to someone else.

‘Have you had any lunch?’ Peter asked.

‘No. It doesn’t matter. Have you?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘I don’t know why you’re waiting. I can telephone you as soon as they’ve let me see him.’

‘I’ll wait just a little longer,’ Peter murmured.

Presently he said: ‘I wonder how he got out of the house? If he didn’t go off with young Sibhodo and party—’

‘Peter.’

‘I’m sorry.’

An elderly man in a white coat came in. ‘Doctor Kengate,’ he announced himself solemnly.

‘Felix—Felix James?’ Julia challenged him.

'Yes . . .'

'You aren't the doctor I saw earlier.'

'No. Three of us have been working on him,' said Dr Kengate, and then he slowly shook his grey head.

'He isn't . . .'

'I'm afraid we haven't been able to save him.'

'But that's absurd!' said Julia sharply.

Dr Kengate, watching her, made no gesture.

Peter's face had gone white and rigid. But he turned towards Julia and put his hand on hers. She shook him off.

'Have you tried *everything*?' Julia persisted.

'I promise you we did.'

Peter murmured something, he didn't know what. Dr Kengate turned to him. 'Are you his parents?' he asked.

'Oh,' said Julia, startled. 'His parents. . . .'

* * *

Peter said: 'I'll see to things here. . . . What about telling Imogen?' He thought that would distract Julia as much as anything. 'It's time she was home from school.'

'Yes. I'll see to that.'

'Or should we wait till later . . . ?'

'She'll have to know. Why wait?'

'Yes, I'm sure you're right. And I'll telephone his parents, then?'

'The police would,' said Julia. 'Or the doctor.' She went out into the grey afternoon.

Imogen had had her tea and was playing spillikins with Yvette. When Julia broke the news, it was Yvette who cried. The effect of it on Imogen was strange. She sat hunched in a chair, very pale, her eyes wide, her face tortured into a kind of elderliness. Julia knew she was suffering from the shock. She was about to send Yvette away when Imogen said in a small husky voice: '*Ne pleure pas, Yvette.*'

Julia, her arms round Imogen, felt her stiff and chilly; only Yvette's tears seemed to soften her a little; Julia thought: It's because she can't cry herself. Not yet. Of

course, she's so young—it's the first death she has known.

Later, she got the doctor to come in and look at Imogen. He said that she was, yes, suffering from shock. He advised a sedative.

Julia took Imogen to sleep downstairs with her that night. At two in the morning Imogen was out of bed, pulling off her pyjamas.

'What are you doing, darling?'

'I've got to go and get Felix.'

Julia put on the light and coaxed her back into bed. Imogen's eyes were wide open.

'... But he went away down the street by himself. I *know* where he is. I'd remember, if I went there. He hasn't got any money and he wants to come home.'

'Go to sleep, darling... It was only a bad dream.'

'But he hadn't got his raincoat and he's all wet—'

'Sh-h, poppet. Felix is all right. He's in heaven...'

In the morning Julia brought the doctor again.

So Imogen went down to Curton after all. Julia took her, that afternoon. The rain had stopped and pools of blue deepened the sky, spreading patches of emerald on the fields. Imogen, still white and remote, was not out of touch—'Look, Mummy; they're cutting hay, over there...'

At Curton she was a little more herself, but it would take time, of course, for her to get over it all. She was very sweet—'I'm all right, honestly, Mummy.... What would *you* like to do this morning?' Julia was gentle with her, and tried not to let her anxiety show.

The Rudd girls, and Imogen's other friends, were mostly away at school. But Imogen seemed quite happy in her mother's company. They walked and played cards and helped in the garden. But Imogen said she didn't want to ride.

'No, thank you, Mummy. I'd rather go into Swenbury with you, if I can?'

One good thing from Julia's point of view was that Peter had been left to 'see to things'. It meant that she and Peter were apart, which neither of them at present

minded, and that Peter had coped with the funeral, and the parents, so Julia need not meet Julian again, which in any case she had not wanted to.

Peter was being very good about it. He telephoned regularly.

'The inquest will probably be in all the papers tomorrow, I'm afraid—'

'I'll see Imogen doesn't catch sight of them.'

'Yes, good.'

On another evening: 'They want a cremation, as I told you; it's for two o'clock tomorrow. I've ordered a spray, from us; I thought a wreath hardly appropriate for a boy of his age—'

'Peter, for heaven's sake—'

'I'm sorry.'

And the next evening: 'There were very few there. Relations, and only a few—'

'You didn't go, did you?'

'I thought it would be fitting.'

'Oh, all right. I dare say it was.'

Every conversation included: 'How's Imogen?'

Julia said: 'Very much the same.'

After about ten days she said: 'Getting better, I think. She's softening, you know, at last.'

'Oh, splendid.'

On that day, Julia and Jim had hatched a plot.

Jim approached Julia as she was cutting flowers. He knew about Imogen and it worried him. 'It's funny she won't even come and see the pony,' he fretted. 'And her so fond of it.'

'It is, isn't it—I know, Jim; suppose you bring the pony to see her?'

So, later, as Julia and Imogen were playing *boule* on the side lawn, there was a rasp of hooves on the gravel, and along the drive came Jim leading Tomahawk in a halter.

Jim called to Imogen: 'Here's a friend of yours who wonders why you haven't been to see him?'

' Imogen looked at Tomahawk's beautiful face and her own, so pale lately, flushed. She walked towards him, then suddenly she began to run, and threw her arms round his neck and cried her eyes out.

Somehow, Julia could not describe this incident to Peter over the telephone. She said: 'I'll tell you about it when you come . . .'

Peter had been to Chequers for part of the bank holiday weekend, but the following weekend he was to come down to Curton.

Julia awaited him without pleasure. She had, she now found, been glad of the idle fortnight alone with Imogen. Her own nerves had welcomed the rest; concentrating on Imogen she had had no time for her own grief. Peter's arrival would inevitably mark a resumption of ordinary life, to some extent.

The incident of Imogen and her pony, much as it had been a relief, had left Julia a little flat; restlessness began; she thought: What next? Next week, next year?

Imogen was improving. She had been for a couple of rides and had bought herself some wool to knit a sweater. She was almost her usual docile self, but an animation was lacking. She, oddly enough, did not seem to look forward to Peter's coming as much as Julia had supposed.

'Daddy will be here tomorrow evening. Isn't that lovely.'

'Yes.'

'It'll be a change for you. I'm sure you're bored stiff with my society.'

'No I'm not. I like being with you. Only Daddy was a bit cross with me.'

'Daddy was? When?'

Imogen wrinkled her brow and said: 'I don't remember. One night. He told me to go to bed.'

'Well, if he did, I'm quite sure he wasn't *cross*. Don't you think perhaps he was a bit tired, or something?'

'Yes, perhaps he was.'

Certainly Peter was absolutely sweet to Imogen when he arrived. He kissed her with a little extra warmth but

no fussiness, and said: 'Well, old lady; how's Tomahawk?' Which was quite the right thing to say, though it might have been all wrong a week ago. But Peter wasn't to know that.

Julia thought: He's got his own way, after all. He can afford to be generous. He's got rid of Felix. . . .

But she was ashamed of the thought. It was rather shabby.

IO

They had dinner early. Imogen was having it with them, and Julia still liked her to have plenty of sleep.

It was raining again; the summer had never yet settled in. But this was the rain of summer, straight and warm. Through the open windows drifted the scents of wet grass and steamy earth.

Peter and Julia talked of this and that, casually. Imogen answered when spoken to, but otherwise ate in amiable silence.

When she had gone to bed, Julia and Peter were left unusually alone. Julia switched on a lamp against the threatening twilight and read a few pages of a biography. She thought of playing the piano, but decided not. She noticed that Imogen had left her knitting on the window sill, and did a few rows for her. She wondered whether to write letters; they had been neglected recently.

Peter sat there with a newspaper like a statue.

Julia thought about letters, and about the one she had had from Moshe Balkan, and suddenly put down the knitting. She caught Peter's inquiring eye.

'What about a drink?' he said.

'If you want one.'

'No, no . . . How is she, really?'

'Imogen? Oh, better. Don't you think so?'

'Yes, I thought so. But not quite herself.'

Julia had meant to tell him about the pony. She decided not. She wasn't in the mood.

Peter was fidgeting. He recrossed his legs and stroked the back of his head; it might have been Andrew goggling there. 'I hope,' he said, 'you haven't missed anything . . . That it hasn't been a nuisance at all, being down here like this?'

‘With Imogen?’

‘No . . . I wish I could have done more.’

‘You’ve been a great help.’

‘I’m glad. About his room—his clothes, and things—I told them to leave it.’

‘There can’t be much. Hewett can pack them and send them to his parents.’

‘Yes . . .’ said Peter on a long, almost interrogative note. ‘About that—I wonder if I should tell you . . .’

‘Yes, do. What?’

He hesitated. Diffidently he resumed: ‘I ought perhaps to tell you, that I saw his parents—you remember—at the crematorium. Julian was very—’

‘I don’t think I need be told.’

‘No. Very well.’

‘—No; go on?’

‘It’s not important. Unless, you see, you were perhaps writing to them . . . Did you?’

‘No. I suppose I ought to, some time. If you think they’d appreciate it? Is that it?’

‘Well, in a way . . . Julian was very calm. I think he was . . . stunned. I was myself. But the mother . . .’

‘Olwen? I hardly expect she was calm.’

‘Understandably,’ said Peter, and he gave Julia a kind, slightly puzzled regard. ‘They don’t seem to have understood what was going on. About—the boy, you know. I explained who I was, and it seemed they hadn’t grasped that he was staying with us—’

‘They must be dense, then. I wrote and told them plainly enough.’

‘There seems to have been some confusion. This was all after the service. I’d offered to do anything I could. I asked Julian if he wished to come back to the house.’

‘That was hardly necessary.’

‘Well—there were the . . . effects, you know.’

‘Effects of what?’

‘Felix’s clothes. Clothes and . . .’

‘Oh, I see. You sound like an undertaker. So?’

“It was then that the mother—Olga?”

‘Olwen, but never mind. She . . .?’

‘Broke down. She was hysterical, obviously. But it was understandable just then. She seemed . . . She suggested that the whole tragedy might have been avoided if . . . That you, in fact—’

‘She blames me, in fact.’

‘It was understandable, in a way.’

‘Don’t use that word again, for heaven’s sake. Yes, I understand Olwen very well, and I wish she understood *me*. I did *everything* for that boy; and what has *she* done? However, we won’t go into it. The whole question of blame, in a tragedy like this, is irrelevant. Because, inadequate. One can’t *descend* to it, if one has any proper feeling.’

‘No,’ said Peter quietly. He was silent for a few seconds and then fidgeted again. ‘I know . . . I know you’ll find anything I say inadequate too, but I would like just to say . . . You must know how I’ve been feeling for you, in all this. But I do feel, too, that time will help. With your vitality and love of people, even a tragedy like this can’t be . . . final. I’m sure you’ll find a sense of . . . renewal, in time—’

‘You’re trying to tell me that I’ll get over it.’

‘Simply, I suppose I am. And you will.’

Julia stood up. ‘I expect so. Thank you for your sympathy. In any case, I haven’t much choice. That has *happened*. One has to accept . . .’ Turning back she said, as kindly as possible: ‘*You* are the tragedy I shall have to make some practical effort to get over.’

He dropped his eyes, fumbling with his newspaper like an old man.

From the door Julia added: ‘I told them to make your bed in the side room. While we’ve got the house to ourselves.’

‘I see. Of course.’

She turned back again with the door open. ‘Don’t *brood*. We won’t do anything drastic, for Imogen’s sake.’

‘No; of course.’

‘Goodnight,’ she said briskly. She went upstairs and sat at her dressing table, listening to the rain that flooded softly down, bathing and renewing the countryside. She took half an hour to plan her future.

* * *

In the morning the sun came out, mistily, as the Culfaxes sat at a leisurely Saturday breakfast. Imogen had come down in jodhpurs.

‘Going riding?’ asked Peter.

‘I might. Only not if I can do anything with you?’

‘Well, you might have your ride first, while I go over some papers I had to bring with me.’

‘All right, Daddy,’ said Imogen, slowly eating cornflakes.

Peter was, evidently, making an effort; luckily the quality of the effort was lost on Imogen’s polite unobtrusiveness.

Julia, reading her letters, left them to it.

Suddenly Peter said: ‘Oh; by the way. A rather important piece of news from home I quite forgot to give you. I’m so sorry.’

‘What was that?’ Julia asked him, coolly, to indicate that there need not be too much of this business-as-usual pose.

‘We’ve had a burglary.’

Julia put down her letter. ‘Yes, I think you might have mentioned that. Where? What was taken? Was there any damage done?’

‘That’s the odd thing. It was Swann who discovered it and as a matter of fact he rather blames himself, because he has no idea when it could have happened or how he failed to notice. Various small items have been taken from different parts of the house. You know the silver display cabinet on the upper landing? They had the things out of that for cleaning, and some of them were missing. So then he checked, all round, and found that several things

had gone from the drawing room cabinets too. Nothing very valuable. This all came to light only . . . last Monday, I believe. Since then they have gone all over the inventory and drawn up a list of what has been stolen. I called the police, of course . . .

Imogen's spoon was poised in mid-air as she listened.

'Had they any ideas?' asked Julia.

'None, so far. They fail to see how anyone could have entered the house, let alone opened the cabinets, with our alarm system. When it comes to the question of insurance, we—'

'It must have been done in the daytime, I suppose,' said Julia. 'People do drift in and out. What about that young prince you found by himself in the drawing-room on the night of the—'

'No, no. Really. We mustn't make rash accusations.'

'Well, *somebody* must have done it. Somebody in the house?'

'Conceivably. But then, again, we know them all so well—'

'One would think so. But the fact remains.'

'It's very awkward. There isn't a very happy atmosphere, though I did all I could to reassure everybody. That cleaning woman—with the red hair, you know?—apparently gave her notice at once, Swann tells me. But that isn't evidence.'

'Rather the contrary. How many dailies have we at present?—But they're so carefully vetted.'

'I know. There's the possibility of regular comers—piano tuners, dressmakers; how much do we know about them?'

'Isn't it a botheration. And we don't know when it happened, at all?'

'Swann says, not within a few months, even. The cabinets haven't been checked in detail since the early spring cleaning.'

'Well, who has been in the house since *then*?'

Imogen said: 'I saw a woman.'

They both turned to her. She laid down her spoon and sat up straight, looking wide-eyed and serious from one to the other.

'A woman? When was this, darling?'

'One day,' said Imogen carefully. 'I was coming in from school. And when I got to the drawing-room door, a woman came out. And she looked a bit surprised to see me. And I said, good afternoon. And she said, I'm a new maid here, could you tell me where the kitchen is? I thought it was a funny thing to say.'

'When was this?' asked Peter keenly.

'I don't quite remember.' She puckered her brow.

'Never mind that just now, darling. What did she look like?'

Imogen drew a long breath. 'She was quite small and she had a blue jumper on and grey hair. And she wore glasses. And she had a big bag in her hand. A leather bag. I think it was black... And she talked Cockney.'

'And then what did she do?'

'I said, the kitchen was downstairs. So she said, Thanks dear, and she went down. And I went up to my room.'

'Have we had any new maids recently?' Peter asked Julia.

'No, not for ages. Go on, darling. Try to remember. Did she go right down to the kitchen? Did you see?'

'I didn't see. But I think I heard the front door shut. Because I remember thinking she must have gone out that way and down the area steps, and I wondered why.'

Peter and Julia looked at each other. This was worth going into. But what immediately impressed them more, and made them look at each other, was that Imogen had not talked so much, or been so animated, since Felix's death. She was really taking an interest.

A burglary was cheap at any price, if it could bring Imogen to life again.

* * *

Imogen said she would be quite willing to tell the police

about the grey-haired woman she had met. In fact she was so ready to, that she did not mind going back to town at all. It made the transition easy. Once back in town, she was prepared to go back to school. She was picking up the threads again. She was over the worst.

The police were baffled, genuinely, by the grey-haired woman. They sought her for months. Even when one or two of the missing articles had been dug up in the garden, the problem was never satisfactorily solved. That young girl who had seen the woman was obviously truthful, apart from the fact that the whole household vouched for her.

Luckily for Nancy Allsop of Bermondsey, who fitted the description, she had been in Holloway from January to June of that year.

When Imogen had been at home for a few days she chose a time while no one was about, disconnected the burglar alarm, went into the drawing-room and replaced the 'eye' paperweight in the cabinet. This caused minor havoc when it was noticed; there were recriminations with the insurance people; the whole inventory had to be done all over again.

Imogen kept the pawn tickets. For a long time they were her most precious possession. She put the silk purse into a large envelope and printed on it: PRECIOS POSSESSION, and left it in her desk for all the world to find; but it never did.

Jane Gillespie

'Miss Gillespie's style is as sharp as her observation, her wit fastening on to human inconsistencies like fish-hooks.'

John Whitley, Sunday Times

'One of the most valuable functions of the novel is to reveal the extra-ordinariness of the ordinary. It is none the less valuable for being at present underrated, and it is good to see the old tradition upheld so effortlessly by Jane Gillespie.'

Iain Hamilton, Daily Telegraph.

'... has made a neat niche for herself in the world of modern fiction ... We *know* her people. They are all around us, and we suspect that we too are among them, as her shrewd eye turns in our direction.' *Richard Church, Country Life*

'... she writes with honesty and compassion.'

Kevin Casey, Irish Times

Novels available

THE DEATH OF A SECRET
A FRESH START
THE HOLIDAY PEOPLE
ILLUSION
MONKEY TRICKS
REGARD FOR TRUTH
THE RING OF WINTER
A TEMPLE OF BRICK
WORLDS APART

